



WAY OF CHOICES

BOOK 02

Mao Ni

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Way of Choices

(Ze Tian ji)

(择天记)

by

Mao Ni

(猫腻)

Synopsis

To pick is to choose. This is a story about choices. Three thousand worlds full of gods and demons, with a daoist scroll in your hand, you are able to control the entire universe...

At the beginning of time, a mystical meteor came crashing down from outer space and scattered all over the world. A piece of it landed in the Eastern Continent. There were mysterious totems carved upon the meteor. Through viewing these totems, mankind comprehended the Dao and established the Orthodoxy.

Several thousand years later, the fourteen years old orphan Chen Changsheng left his master to cure his illness and change his fate. He brought a part of a marriage vow with him to the capital, thus beginning the journey of a rising hero...

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English Translation by bbkgs, Felyndiira, Hypersheep325, Pipipingu, Translator Emeritus @ [Binggo&Corp Translations](#)

Translations Edits by bbkgs @ [Binggo&Corp Translations](#)

ePub conversion by Lisa Hayes @ [Hasseno Blog](#)

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Chapter 101 –Reminiscing In Herb Garden

Chen Chang Sheng walked towards the middle aged woman and bowed.

Even though he saw the person wasn't Luo Luo, he didn't turn around and leave because he knew this middle aged woman.

That night of the Ivy Festival, he was sent to the depths of Black Dragon pond by Mo Yu. After struggling against life and death, he finally broke through the seal and came back to the surface of the pond. This middle aged woman was next to the pond, perhaps cleaning her hands or washing her cloth and was almost harmed by a tricky squirrel.

He had guessed that the candle light in the Herb Garden was probably not due to Luo Luo's return, but he was still a little sad knowing that it was not Luo Luo.

Glancing around the dark forest, he thought confusingly: If this middle aged woman is living in the Royal Palace, how would she appear at the Herb Garden? From her age, she should be a female officer at the royal palace. However, if she's a concubine of the former emperor, then this would be a troublesome situation.

He was alarmed. He walked in front of the middle aged woman and gestured in sign language. He was afraid that he would scare the woman, so he kept his expression calm. His speed of gesture was also smooth and slow to not frighten her.

He asked her how she left the royal palace.

The middle aged woman looked at him quietly, but didn't answer.

Chen Chang Sheng was confused. He gestured again, but this time even more slowly. He believe that his intention was clear enough, How did you get here from the royal palace?

The middle aged woman smiled and raised her right hand. There was a key between her fingers.

Chen Chang Sheng's eyes were keen. Even though the lighting in Herb Garden was a little dim, he still saw the rust on the key, and there were two new scratches. Perhaps they were new marks, but the old key seemed to not have been used in a long time before tonight.

When Mo Yu left Tradition Academy that day, he saw the old door in the palace's wall. Maybe this key was used to open that door.

Perhaps this middle aged woman has the permission to leave royal palace whenever she wants? Then her status in the royal palace was extraordinary.

The middle aged woman pointed at the stone table and gestured him to sit down,

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a moment and followed her gesture.

The middle aged woman turned around and glanced at a wooden house in the depths of Herb Garden. She was silent for a long time. Suddenly her left hand landed on the stone table and lightly knocked on the surface two times.

There was a teapot on the table, and two tea cups behind the oil candle.

Chen Chang Sheng understood her meaning and picked up the teapot to fill a teacup. He handed the cup mannerly to the middle age woman.

Although the tea in the pot had no fragrance, it was thick. It should be old black tea.

It was easier to see across the table. Looking at the middle aged woman's complexion, she shouldn't be a concubine of the former emperor. Perhaps she's one of the female officers under the command of Divine Queen, she may even be the leader of the female officers. But Chen Chang Sheng's respect for her had nothing to do with her status in the royal palace, it was only because she was much older than him.

He believed that the years a person lived for was an important factor. Just like the black tea in the pot, the older, the thicker and the richer, the more a person can taste from it. He was sad that he may not live very long so he respected the elders even more.

The middle aged woman picked up the teacup and moved it close to her lips. She took a sip.

Chen Chang Sheng noticed that her lips were thicker than those of ordinary females.

It was unmannerly for him to stare at a woman's lips, even though she was much older and just average looking. Chen Chang Sheng realized his misbehavior and quickly shifted his glance, then he saw the other teacup on the stone table.

The garden was empty during the autumn night, why were there two teacups?

He glanced at the middle aged woman and gestured to ask if he can drink some tea. He had sweated a lot previously when he was helping Xuan Yuan Po with his wounds. He was kind of thirsty right now.

The middle aged woman didn't look at him but she nodded lightly in approval.

Chen Chang Sheng picked up the teacup and took a sip. He noticed the tea was rich and soothing, it was a pot of righteous tea.

Even the famous teas that Luo Luo previously gifted him couldn't compare to the seemingly ordinary black tea in this pot.

How a pot of tea tastes depends on the leaves itself, but more importantly, the person who boiled the tea.

A person who can boil such a pot of black tea was definitely of no ordinary status.

Chen Chang Sheng's looked at the middle aged woman with even more respect in his eyes.

He put down the teacup and waited for her to ask a question.

But even after they finished their cups of tea, the middle aged woman didn't say anything.

She sat quietly next to the table and looked around the surrounding of Herb Garden. There was no emotion in her eyes, there were only countless memories.

But Chen Chang Sheng wasn't one of them.

Chen Chang Sheng was a little embarrassed, a little nervous even. He wasn't use to this kind of silence.

As time passed, he slowly adopted to this atmosphere and didn't think too much of it. He poured tea for the middle aged woman and himself, and then drank from the cup. Both of them were silent as they listened to the crickets in the Herb Garden. Slowly, his mind calmed and wandered off.

Only until then did he realize that he had always liked quiet and was used to quiet.

He never liked to talk much when he was little.

Only until he arrived at the capital did he really started speaking to others. He spoke with Madam Xu, Shuang Er, and Lady Mo Yu for some particular reason. After Tang Thirty Six came to Tradition Academy, he showed his true self and talked all day and

Chen Chang Sheng had no choice but to talk back.

He was tired out from all the conversations.

There was no rule saying that when two people sit together, they must speak.

Sometimes it's fine to just sit there quietly.

Even if they need to converse, they don't need to speak. A simple gesture will suffice.

It was as if he returned to Xi Ning Village. He was with his senior near the river behind the old temple. They were reading the Scrolls of the Way with the help of starlight. When they read up to a confusing part, they would gesture each other to communicate, then they would continue reading silently.

The river was just like Herb Garden at this moment. It was quiet. It was comfortable.

Xi Ning Village was a rural area. Every night, the region would be pitch dark so the starlight was extremely bright. When it landed on earth, it was like snow covering the ground. After Chen Chang Sheng came to the capital, he wasn't used to the complicated relationships between people, but he never got use to the candle lights at night and the dim starlight.

After several autumn rains washed the sky of the capital clear, there were no artificial lights left besides the oil candle on the stone table of Herb Garden. The lamps of royal palace were also blocked by the dense forest so at this moment, the starlight seemed to got brighter than usual.

The starlight shone through the branches of the trees and landed on his face.

He raised his face and glanced at the starry sky. He reminisced about the old temple of Xi Ning Village and his senior, but the bright starlight made him squint his eyes.

Under the silver starlight, his eyebrows were still so clean.

He squinted his eyes and all the youth of him surfaced.

He was just as kind as usual, but a little cuter.

Just this moment, the middle aged woman switched her glare from the Herb Garden to him.

She looked at him quietly.

He was squinting his eyes so he didn't notice her attention. He was reminiscing, thinking back to the past.

She was stumped while looking at him.

Her reminiscence had just finished.

She picked up her right hand and smoothly touched his face.

Chen Chang Sheng was surprised. His eyes opened widely and he looked at the middle aged woman.

He wasn't used to bodily contact because he had no experience when he was little. Plus he didn't know the woman; they had only met twice.

He instinctively wanted to back off, but then he saw the eyes of the woman.

The eyes were like a lake of stars. They contained complex feelings, but slowly the mood became sad and despair.

He didn't want to leave so abruptly. This woman must have faced countless evil and dark things in her years at the royal palace.

Therefore, he stayed calm and let her palm move across his face even though it felt weird.

The woman's hand was warm and thick. It slowly rub his face and Chen Chang Sheng's body got stiff. Only after a long time did he relax again.

Suddenly, the middle aged woman squeezed his cheeks, just like an elder would do to a newborn infant.

Chen Chang Sheng couldn't sit still anymore so he stood up. He back off two steps and bowed, "I need to go back."

After saying this, he remembered that she was deaf and mute so he quickly gestured.

The middle aged woman saw his reaction and laughed loudly.

Of course, her laugh was silent. But a sense of pride and power was within her laugh. Everyone who saw it would know that she was laughing openly.

She didn't wait for Chen Chang Sheng's departure. The woman stood up and walked towards the depth of Herb Garden.

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a moment and followed up.

The nightly gale blew lightly, the leaves fell upon the stone table and swirled around the teapot and the teacup.

For twenty years, the teacup and the teapot had been used by its owner. No one knew how long it would be until the next time.

What surprised Chen Chang Sheng was that the middle aged woman didn't go to Tradition Academy, rather she went straight into the depths of the Herb Garden. She arrived at the old and broken down palace wall. Looking at that old door, he then realized that her way was different from the path of Mo Yu.

The middle aged woman didn't bother with him, nor did she mind him following. She took out the key and inserted it into the lock. After two clicks, the lock opened. The old wooden door was pushed open and she walked in.

Until this point, Chen Chang Sheng knew nothing dangerous would happen. He calmed his heart and relaxed the hand that was holding the handle tightly. He looked at the back of the woman and yelled lightly. He wanted to say something but the door unexpected shut quickly before his eyes.

She left just like this? He was stumped, but after realizing she couldn't hear voices, Chen Chang Sheng was relieved.

The closed wooden door somehow seemed to be a part of the palace wall.

He looked at the door and was confused.

Were the things that happened tonight actually real?

Why were they so similar to the fairytales in the scrolls?

But the bittersweet taste of tea was still swirling around in his mouth.

That warm feeling of contact was still on his face.

He shook his head, turned around and left.

On the other side of the door exists a long hallway.

Around the hallway were moss and ivies, beneath the ivies were at least six types of traps and seals that could kill xiuxingists of the Starfusion stage.

The hallway was constructed with stone bricks.

The middle aged woman stepped upon the stone bricks and walked forward slowly. Her expression changed gradually.

Just after dozens of steps, a sense of immense power returned to her body.

That seemingly ordinary complexion became a great beauty.

Not the weak and soft kind of pretty, but the shiny and blinding type of radiance.

When she walked out of the hallway, the surroundings changed as well.

Under the night sky, the Royal Palace stood in eternity.

Chapter 102 – Soothing The Past And Present In The Platform Of Dew

Xue Xing Chuan led the Red Cloud Kylin through the entrance. This elite who ranked second among the thirty eight Generals in the continent now appeared to be extremely respectful and submissive. The Red Cloud Kylin beside him looked even worse. Its body kept on shaking and it couldn't stand still. The hammer-like kylin tail kept on waving back and forth. It seemed distressed.

The middle aged woman wrinkled her eyebrows.

Xue Xing Chuan didn't understand why his mount was behaving so strangely tonight. He stood up and tried to explain, "the power of the Queen is boundless....."

The middle aged woman was the Divine Queen of Zhou Dynasty, the most prestigious individual in this world.

"It's unrelated to me, you don't have to worry," she thought back to the moment when the youngster of Tradition Academy stood near the door and held his sword handle. She rubbed the neck of the kylin lightly. In just a moment, the Red Cloud Kylin calmed down.

"Next time don't bring it so close, or else it may actually die from exhaustion," she looked at Xue Xing Chuan and said.

Xue Xing Chuan was confused. He thought to himself, "Is the

weird behavior of kylin due to the ordinary youngster named Chen Chang Sheng?”

“You really think he’s ordinary?”

The Divine Queen seemed to read through his mind and said indifferently, “If he’s actually an ordinary youngster, how could he break even with Gou Han Shi at the Ivy Festival? Without some skills, why would the elders use him to distract me?”

Xue Xing Chuan was silent, because at this moment, it was unfitting for him to speak. Especially since the Divine Queen had expressed her dislike of the Tradition Academy today, it meant that he had made a big mistake dealing with the public riot in front of the Tradition Academy the way he did.

Only one Night Pearl on the Nectar Platform was lit up. The black goat named Hei Yu was standing besides the Night Pearl. It was rubbing its head against the pearl, while Mo Yu was grinding ink in front of the desk. The wind was blowing the hair on her cheek causing it to be a little messy.

Hearing the voice, she turned around and saw the Divine Queen walk up the platform. She immediately went over to walk by her.

“Queen, the fall rain washed the sky several times. Tonight was the right time to observe stars but you came late.”

Divine Queen said, “I have already seen it tonight.”

Mo Yu was surprised, asked, “Where did you see it?”

Divine Queen said, “In the Herb Garden.”

Hearing these words, Mo Yu felt a little shocked thinking that anyone in the palace would know that ever since the previous emperor passed away, the Queen had never visited the Herb Garden. Why did she break the rule tonight?

“You went to the Tradition Academy today?” The Divine Queen seemed to ask casually.

She didn’t say “I heard you went to the Tradition Academy,” because she was the Divine Queen; she didn’t need to ask indirect questions.

The coldness in Mo Yu’s heart grew. She thought to herself, how would she even dare to hide anything but she responded with a low voice, “Yes.”

The Divine Queen raised her left hand and lightly touched Mo Yu’s soft cheek. She said, “Did you do these things?”

Mo Yu knew what kind of positions the Queen and Tian Hai Family played in the two consecutive blood baths that happened today.

She didn't understand the Queen's attitude, so she didn't dare answer recklessly. Mo Yu answered lightly, "I dare not."

"Without your permission, they dared to act? The Tradition Academy is pretty close to the Royal Palace."

The Divine Queen looked at her and said lightly. Her right hand was still rubbing her face.

Mo Yu noticed the smile on the Queen's lips and her heart froze. She was terrified.

How would she know that the Divine Queen was just thinking about the youngster and was comparing the smoothness of their faces?

Mo Yu lowered her head and said, "The whole business about this marriage still needs a conclusion.....Xu You Rong used the marriage vow as an excuse to not marry Qiu Shan Jun. The bond between North and South...."

"What about the bond between North and South? I said it before, if Xu You Rong doesn't want to marry, then let her be, but.....no one believed me."

The Divine Queen lowered her hand and walked to the Platform of Dew while glancing at the capital under the night sky. Her voice showed a trace of loneliness, "Everyone always thinks I value the world the most and that sacrificing a girl's dream is trivial by

comparison. Therefore you didn't believe me, even Xu You Rong didn't believe me. For this.....you used all that you can."

Mo Yu was silence for a moment and said, "Regardless of the marriage vow, I still think the youngster is a little strange. He appeared in such a precise moment and critical situation."

The critical moment she was referring to was the bad influence the marriage vow had on the policy of Zhou Dynasty. In addition, he was now a symbol of the old force of capital to strike against the Queen.

The Divine Queen didn't turn around and said indifferently, "Aren't you the one who put him into the Tradition Academy?"

Mo Yu's expression turned serious, "Yes, but I'm thinking perhaps someone was pushing the wave in disguise and used the Dong Yu General's Mansion and Xu You Rong's letter to prevent me from making the correction decision, and this decision helped Chen Chang Sheng appear in front of the public of the capital.

"So what if he appeared?"

"His last name is Chen. Perhaps someone is trying to make the capital's public think back to the royal family."

".....how did your research go?"

"His teacher is Taoist Ji.....and besides this, there are no more

clues. According to the message from Xi Ning, the old temple is still there but no one is in it.”

Hearing the name of Taoist Ji, Divine Queen was silent for a long time and she suddenly said, “Stop the investigation.”

Mo Yu was surprised, she didn’t understand why the Divine Queen ordered this.

Divine Queen looked at the starry sky quietly. There is fate, but no one can see through their own fate, even she can’t.

But she had the confidence to control her fate and even the heaven cannot stop her from doing so.

That youngster was her nemesis?

Hilarious.

She said, “The capital is vast.”

Mo Yu was little surprised, she didn’t understand what the Queen meant.

“The continent is vast, the sky is wider, but none of them can compare to my heart.”

She said slowly, “And you think I can’t allow the existence of a single academy?”

Mo Yu was shocked, even if the Divine Queen wouldn’t be happy, she was ready to object.

The Divine Queen didn’t turn around and she raised her right hand to gesture that there was nothing more to say.

This was her first time expressing her attitude towards Tradition Academy, and it will be her last time.

Her attitude towards the Tradition Academy depended on her attitude towards Chen Chang Sheng. She knew about Chen Chang Sheng’s sickness and sympathized. No matter who was using him and why, she decided to give him a chance — a chance to prove that he once lived.

“Don’t disturb that youngster, at least not before the Great Trial.”

Mo Yu was yet to recover from her shock. Upon hearing the Queen’s request, she asked confusingly, “Why the Great Trial?”

The Divine Queen said, “A kid who still can’t xiuxing as of now wants to claim the championship of the Great Trial. Don’t you think this is kind of interesting? Don’t you think this child is interesting?”

Mo Yu thought back to Chen Chang Sheng's stiff expression. She was confused of how he was interesting to the Queen.

Looking at the figure standing on the Platform of Dew, Mo Yu suddenly thought that there was something strange about the Queen today but she couldn't figure out what.

“Those people moved to Li Palace. I won't let anyone live there and disturb the peace. So stop appearing in my dreams.....well, even if you do appear, please talk about something joyous and stop complaining all the time.”

The Divine Queen quietly looked at the night sky and stared into a blank spot. She said in her heart, “I went to drink some tea in Herb Garden.”

That spot in the night sky was now in darkness, but twenty years ago, it was the spot of the brightest star.

It was a star of Emperor.

That star meant a lot to her, just like the Herb Garden.

Several hundred years ago, she was forced out of the Royal Palace and she xiuxinged in the Herb Garden. Several years passed just like that.

During those years, the former emperor would come out of the door and visit her every night.

She was a Taoist and because of certain things, she was inspected by many in the court. Even the closest ones to her could be spies from different factions. Even if she dared to meet with the former emperor, she couldn't do much.

The things she and the former emperor did at the Herb Garden was drink tea and converse.

Even if they met in the dark of the night when no one was around, the closest she and the former emperor got to was touching each other's faces and staring at each other's eyes.

“Tonight, I saw a youngster who was just like you.”

The Divine Queen looked at the night sky and smiled.

A moment later, her smile vanished and her voice became cold, “Coincidentally, his last name is also Chen.”

The autumn rain was unpredictable. It's not as lovely as the spring rain, and its coldness was irritating.

Although the autumn was still here and nothing seemed to have happened, in reality, a lot has happened.

Although the Divine Queen didn't say a word about the troubles in the capital, all the people who were qualified knew her attitude.

Therefore peace once again returned to the capital.

The ambassadors of South lived exclusively in the Academy of Li Palace.

Princess Luo Luo, who was in the spotlight, was not heard from again. But rumors says that she's also living in Li Palace.

Family of Tian Hai started searching for treasure around the world to prepare for the marriage between Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Princess Ping Guo next year. Tian Hai Sheng Xue returned to the Yong Xue Gate.

Some of the students who passed the semi-trials were accepted into the Six Ivies, while the others were preparing vigorously in their taverns.

The central topic of capital is slowly transitioning to the approaching Great Trial.

As with the previous months, the Tradition Academy was now very quiet.

After that autumn rain, no one dared to disturb Tradition Academy and the Tradition Academy didn't fix their door either. The broken entrance just layed there and mocked the Family of Tian Hai silently.

Countless people reminisced about the old Chen period and hated the Family of Tian Hai. Slowly, the broken entrance of the Tradition Academy became a famous tourist attraction. Everyday people would visit and express their opinions about the Tian Hai Family, or even towards the Divine Queen.

The guard of the Tradition Academy was part of the attraction – a figure who participated in the previous war against Demon Race. A legendary figure like Jin Yu Lu cannot be seen anywhere else so easily.

With regards to the youngsters of the Tradition Academy.....the people still talked about the fiance of Xu You Rong. Disdain and scorn filled their expression when doing so but their voices of discussion were always low, and no one dared to curse.

Because now the entire capital knew that there were a lot of rocks in the Tradition Academy.

The entrance of Tradition Academy became an attraction, but not many people dared to enter the attraction.

Of course, some people didn't care for such things. They could even sleep in this attraction.

The autumn leaves outside of the window were reflecting the golden sunlight. The view was beautiful.

Chen Chang Sheng looked away from his window and glanced at

the long and smooth dark hair on his bed. He didn't understand.
How did the situation come to this?

Chapter 103 – Fall In Love With Your Bed

He walked towards the bed and shook the person inside his blanket gently. The clear sensation he felt on his finger reminded him that he should switch to a thicker blanket... Perhaps, the autumn days were getting colder?

Mo Yu opened her eyes and woke up. She took off the earmuffs and sat up on the bed. She yawned and stood up like nothing happened. Then, she walked in front of the bronze mirror to check her complexion. She first combed her dark hair and then started to wash away the leftover makeup on her face.

Once again, she showed off the unique technique of Starfusion xiuxingists. Countless water drops appeared magically from her thin fingers and reflected gem-like rays under the sunlight.

Watching her smoothly rub her face with the water drops, Chen Chang Sheng couldn't help but shake his head.

After the last time he saw the scene of Mo Yu waking up and fixing her makeup, Chen Chang Sheng thought back and felt that it was a waste of life.

Yes, not a misuse of her ability, but a waste of life.

Those pure water drops were formed from her qi. Qi is absorbed from starlight during meditation, and meditation requires time. Time is life.

She was able to achieve such a high stage in xiuxing but she uses her ability to wash away makeup on her face. Obviously, she was wasting her life.

Looking at the youngster's expression in the bronze mirror, Mo Yu knew what he was thinking about and said, "Only the water that is taken from the heaven and earth is of the purest form. Since it doesn't need any containers to hold it, it isn't contaminated. This type of water is the best kind to wash one's face."

Chen Chang Sheng was silent.

Mo Yu took out a towel from the drawer and lightly dried away the water on her face thinking that her explanation was pointless to a male.

Suddenly, she felt something strange.

She thought to herself, why was she explaining this to him?

"The recent peace of Tradition Academy will sustain until the Great Trial."

She stood up and looked at Chen Chang Sheng expressionlessly, "You should understand what kind of sympathy and kindness this is and you should stay put as well."

Chen Chang Sheng thought about it, but didn't say anything.

"I heard.....you are preparing to claim the championship of the Great Trial?" Mo Yu asked interestingly.

Chen Chang Sheng was a little surprised.

Of his journey from Xi Ning to the capital, his most important goal was to take first place at the Great Trial. But if this was known to the public, it would attract more mocking and discussion than marrying Xu You Rong. Because of his fear of this, he only told his two most trusted peers.

Luo Luo and Tang Thirty Six knew about it... plus the dark dragon.

Where did Mo Yu hear about such a thing?

He remembered something, perhaps he brought up the topic when he was talking with maid Shuang Er in Dong Yu General's Mansion.

He didn't want to present his goal to the entire world, but when someone was asking him, he couldn't object. Lying and covering up isn't his way of life.

"Yes, I want to try and test the possibilities." He looked at Mo Yu and said.

Mo Yu's expression slowly turned solemn. Due to Chen Chang Sheng's calm expression when he replied, she couldn't mock him.

She wrinkled her eyebrows slightly and said, "Although I don't like you, I know you are not an arrogant idiot."

Chen Chang Sheng answered, "I just want to try."

"Have you seen anyone recently?"

Mo Yu suddenly asked. She asked him if he saw anything, but didn't add any specific details, not even a name. Because she was confident that if Chen Chang Sheng saw that person, he would remember and would know who she was talking about.

The Divine Queen told her that Chen Chang Sheng wanted to claim the first place in the Great Trial.

The peace of the Tradition Academy was also given by the Divine Queen.

She never understood why the attitude of the Queen suddenly changed that night. She tried to find any hidden connection between these events.

Chen Chang Sheng was stumped. He had been xiuxing and reading in Tradition Academy for the past few days. He didn't even

step out of the academy's door, how could he encounter.....

He suddenly remembered that middle aged woman who sat in Herb Garden and drank tea with him. He grew cautious. Is Mo Yu trying to ask about the middle aged woman? What is her purpose? Mo Yu has dominant influence in the palaces and he was worried that she may bring trouble to the middle aged woman.

“Who?” He didn't admit nor object. He was only asking a rhetorical question.

It was a suitable reply. Mo Yu didn't think too much about it. She looked at Chen Chang Sheng's clean complexion and thought back to the Divine Queen's expression when she talked about the youngster. She knew something strange was happening.

After a moment of thought, she looked at Chen Chang Sheng and laughed. The usual cold and prideful eyes suddenly became seductive and she asked quietly, “I slept on your bed two times, perhaps there is some fragrance left over. Did you smell it at night when you were sleeping?”

When she laughed, her eyes squinted. Although her voice was a little husky, it was nice to hear.

Chen Chang Sheng stepped back and kept his distance while answering, “I did not.”

Mo Yu followed up and widened her eyes. She looked at him and

asked sincerely, “Why?”

Although she seemed to not do it on purpose, her eyes brightened and it made men nervous.

“Because after you left that day, I changed the blankets.”

Chen Chang Sheng said, “After you leave today, I’ll change the blanket again.”

The room got quiet and the golden leaves outside the window were waving back and forth in the wind. It seemed like the leaves were mocking the crickets that were jumping in the grass.

A few moments later, she slowly stood up and looked into his eyes while asking, “Why?”

Chen Chang Sheng answered honestly, “Sanitation problems.”

Mo Yu’s breath got heavier. She asked coldly, “You think I’m dirty?”

Chen Chang Sheng answered sincerely, “I know being a neat freak isn’t necessarily good, but you never take off your coat when you sleep.....I can’t accept that.”

Mo Yu controlled her desire to destroy the entire building and smash Chen Chang Sheng into pieces. She walked heavily to the

door and stopped. She thought about Chen Chang Sheng's words again and turned around and asked, "You are saying you don't like my clothes being dirty, not me being dirty?"

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know how to answer. From his point of view, Mo Yu tilting her head and asking curiously was kind of cute, almost like Luo Luo. How could he connect her to the keen and powerful Lady Mo Yu?

Mo Yu smiled sweetly and asked, "If that's what you are worried about, then I'll take off my coat next time, or I will just be completely naked when sleeping in your blanket. If I do that, will you change your blanket afterwards?"

Chen Chang Sheng never expected this kind of situation. His mouth opened slightly but no words came out.

Mo Yu lowered her head and said embarrassingly, "If you are still happy with that.....then I will take a bath first and clean myself up beforehand. That will be fine, right?"

Chen Chang Sheng's mouth opened wider and could only let out one syllable – that syllable is definitely not the Dragon Tone that Taoist Ji taught him.

"Ah?"

"You are shy now?" Mo Yu covered her the smile on her lips with her hand. A trace of pride flashed through her eyes.

“I think it’s best not to.”

Chen Chang Sheng woke up from his thoughts and looked at her while speaking solemnly. “There is a barrier between man and woman, plus you got Min Palace in the Royal Palaces and you have your own house in Orange Garden. Why do you need to sleep at Tradition Academy? Moreover, why sleep on my bed? If anyone else heard about this, it would be devastating to your reputation....”

Mo Yu didn’t have time to hear his lectures. She blinked a few times and asked lightly, “Are you not satisfied?”

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a moment and scratched his head, “I never thought much about the things between men and women, plus.....I don’t understand it.”

Mo Yu’s eyes were filled with laughter, “If you don’t understand.....I can teach you.”

Chen Chang Sheng moved back another two more steps and arrived in front of the window. He spoke with reason, “Lady, I am in an arranged marriage.”

His room wasn’t too high, it was on the second floor. It would be easy for him to jump to the surface.

Mo Yu laughed happily and said, “Speaking of which, you and Xu

You Rong are very similar. If it's necessarily, you guys can use the marriage vow as a shield. But what if you were not the fiancée of Xu You Rong?"

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head, "I still won't."

He didn't even think about it and gave his answer. It hurt Mo Yu's pride.

She was a little irritated and asked, "Why?"

Chen Chang Sheng said, "Because you are ill."

Mo Yu was furious, "You are ill!"

Chen Chang Sheng thought to himself, "I'm ill." But my secret shouldn't be spilled to others. He looked at her seriously and said, "I'm speaking the truth. You are under constant pressure and have insomnia while sweating too often. I believe no matter where you are, in the palace or Orange Garden, you can't fall asleep. That's why you are walking around early in the morning.

Mo Yu raised her eyebrows slightly and stared at him while not speaking. She thought to herself, "How does he know this?"

Just this year she was suffering from insomnia and sweating. She couldn't fall asleep at night and she needed to help the Divine Queen during the day. She rarely had a moment to close her eyes because of the articles she needed to edit before handing them to

the Divine Queen. After days and days of loss of sleep, even as a xiuxingist of Starfusion stage, she couldn't handle it anymore.

The reason she carries around soundproof earmuffs and fragrance bags is to fall asleep.

But they were of no use. Only until few days ago when Family of Tian Hai was attacking Tradition Academy and she came to the academy to see what was going on so that she could control the level of riot while forcing Chen Chang Sheng to disband the marriage vow did she somehow manage to fall asleep on his bed.

She didn't understand why.

Chen Chang Sheng's bed was ordinary besides the fact that it was extremely clean. But how could she fall asleep so easily on it?

The bed has a dull color and its texture was just normal cotton. How did it have a thin scent that could surround her with safety?

Mo Yu couldn't find an explanation. She thought what happened that day was just a coincidence. But after that day her insomnia got worse, especially after the Divine Queen went to Herb Garden. Mo Yu needed to think about too many things and she just couldn't sleep. Until today, she finally gave up and came here again.

She told herself the reason she came to Tradition Academy today was to warn Chen Chang Sheng, and at the same time gather some information between the Queen and Chen Chang Sheng. But the

moment she saw Chen Chang Sheng's bed, she knew that she only wanted to sleep on his bed.

“Constant worry?” Mo Yu looked at him and asked, her expression was heavy and the depths of her pupil showed a trace of coldness.

Chapter 104 – Remember A Person

“Yes, you worry too much.”

Besides insomnia and worry, Chen Chang Sheng said a few more symptoms. All matched up with her and in the end, he also mentioned the instability of the endocrine system.

“Enough!”

Mo Yu’s face turned slightly red. She said, “I admit that what all you said is correct. Just tell me how to cure it.”

Chen Chang Sheng felt a bit strange. He asked, “Even if the imperial physicians can’t cure your disease immediately, they can definitely temporarily suppress the symptoms but you never went to see them.

Mo Yu didn’t say a word.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head and said, “It’s not a good thing to suspect the doctors.”

“What do you understand?” Mo Yu looked at him and said. She could no longer hold in her thoughts.

As the Queen’s closest female official, there were countless people watching her movements. For some diseases, she could go

to see doctors, but for others, she couldn't. In the beginning, as she self-diagnosed that her disease was probably related to cardio and mentality, she immediately discarded her intention to get a doctor.

Did she worry too much? What kind of worries did she have?

The entire continent knew her whole family had been exterminated. Was this her biggest worry?

Did she actually feel discontent towards the Divine Queen?

She couldn't let anyone know that. Because of her worries, she couldn't even go to sleep.

Until today, Chen Chang Sheng pointed it out.

She stared at Chen Chang Sheng's eyes and thought that she would have to take more risk by killing him than trusting him.

"Would you keep the secret for me?" she asked.

She and Chen Chang Sheng were enemies, but for no particular reason, she believed in Chen Chang Sheng's promise. What Chen Chang Sheng wanted was much simpler. Since she started to ask for medicine, the relationship between them was no longer that of enemies, but of a physician and his patient.

As a physician, he obviously had to keep the secret of his

patients, so he nodded.

“How should I cure it? Do you want me to diagnose your pulse?”

Mo Yu remembered that he was Taoist Ji's disciple so she felt a bit more confident in him. Raising her hand and extending it to the front of his eyes, she said, “it's better if you don't give medicine.”

Chen Chang Sheng understood why she said this. It was because it was very hard to keep it a secret when there were dregs of decoction. Thinking that this girl who seemed to live a good life was actually living so cautiously as if she was living in the abyss everyday made him disliked her less for no good reason.

He softly placed his finger on her wrist. After a short while, he made his decision. He said, “It's fine if you don't take medicine, it's just going to take longer time.”

Mo Yu felt more relax hearing his words.

“Relax your mind, take a walk more often, eat more porridge of coix seeds, and then...”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the middle of her eyebrows, the leftover of makeups was already washed off, yet there was still a bit dryness. After hesitating for a while, he said, “some symptoms will be cured naturally after marriage.”

Mo Yu felt a bit surprised, then she realized that her cheeks

suddenly turned red while her face looked angry.

She harshly stared at him but she didn't say anything. She just left.

Chen Chang Sheng walked to the window and looked at her shadow disappearing in the depth of the forest. He shook his head.

Walking on the thick and firm fallen leaves in the forest and hearing the sound of her footsteps, Mo Yu's heart was in a mess. The cold fall wind passed through the forest and touched her face, yet her face was still so hot. Previously when Chen Chang Sheng's spoke of her instability(her period), she already felt very humiliated but when he pointed out that she was still a virgin, she felt a mix of humiliation and anger.

If Chen Chang Sheng was an old and respectable imperial physician, then it wouldn't matter. But from all perspectives, he was just a young man who lacked experiences in the society.

The fall leaves broke along with her footsteps. Her clothes moved alongside the fall wind as she passed through the forest in the Tradition Academy. Arriving at the palace, she gradually calmed down. She glanced back at the faint little building behind the forest. Remembering what she just did, she felt very surprised.

Did she actually just leer at a young man and say so many shameless words to lure him? Although now, she already knew the secret – the young man was not her enemy. She could stay very relax when facing him, but...what she did today was way off limits.

Her cheek that had just cooled down suddenly turned hot again. Her beautiful eyes were filled with humiliation. If anyone knew what she did to Chen Chang Sheng today at the Tradition Academy, the entire capital might get crazy.

Suddenly, she became calm. Standing for a long time in front of the wall of the palace, no one knew what she was thinking. The leaves fell that on her skirt gradually stacked up and made her look even thinner and extremely lonely.

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As the fall passed by, the winter and the Great Trial got closer and closer.

The Tradition Academy again welcomed a long period of peace. Chen Chang Sheng cared about the peace so much that he used all his time on xiu xing and studying. Xuan Yuan Po did the same. Although Tang Thirty Six missed the prosperous world outside of the school a lot, he was forced to work hard because of his two friends.

Inside the library, Chen Chang Sheng absorbed starlight to purify every night. Although there wasn't any change in his body or any progress in his xiu xing, he was not frustrated at all. From meditation to absorption, he did every step seriously and without error.

Xuan Yuan Po's right arm gradually healed and the healing

became faster and faster. If he could recover before the winter and begin practicing the xiuxing methods under Chen Chang Sheng's guidance, he might actually catch the Great Trial.

Tang Thirty Six never stopped xiu xing. The amount of his qi and the purity consistently increased. His xiu xing became more and more stable. He had already arrived at the Gate of Heartseeking Stage, yet just like the other youngsters on the Honor Roll of the Green Cloud, before being fully prepared, he absolutely would not take the risk to take that step.

From the upper stage of Meditation to Heartseeking Stage was the most hazardous and dangerous barrier in xiu xing. No matter how talented the xiuxingists were, they still had to prepare for a long time. Even Qiu Shan Jun used one full year, and that was on top of the foundation that the Li Mountain Sword Sect gave him.

As of right now, Tang Thirty Six was definitely the first person in the Tradition Academy to face the dead or alive test. As the first student in the Tradition Academy, Chen Chang Sheng of course wouldn't watch him fight alone. In fact, Chen Chang Sheng already prepared a lot.

The first was in the form of potions. These days, he and Tang Thirty Six had secretly sneaked into the Herb Garden three times to acquire many rare herbs and fruits. When needed, he would refine potions using the methods taught by his teacher, Taoist Ji. He believed that he would definitely refine potions that were not worse than that of places such as Li Mountain Sword Sect and the Heavenly Academy. The second was in the form of methods. Although he didn't even successfully purify, he had already begun

reading books related to meditation hoping to help Tang Thirty Six successfully pass the barrier.

The process of stealing herbs from the Herb Garden was very stressful. It was somewhat against his morals. Yet in comparison to the bigger idea that life was more important than anything else, he didn't think too much of it. But when looking at the oil lamp on the stone table, he naturally remembered that middle aged lady.

Then he remembered Luo Luo.

If it wasn't for Luo Luo who opened a door on the wall, if it wasn't for Luo Luo living at the Herb Garden for a long time, if it wasn't for Luo Luo leaving Official Jin at the Tradition Academy who helped them steal the herbs, the entire process couldn't take place.

One night, when Chen Chang Sheng was reading an ancestor's note on making the transition from Meditation to Heartseeking Stage, he remembered again that he forgot a very important thing.

It was still Luo Luo.

Suddenly, his back was drenched with sweat.

Chapter 105 – Heading To Li Palace

Luo Luo had the bloodline of the White Emperor and its characteristic trait of ample True Essence (zhenyuan). Having instructed her at Orthodox Academy for the past few months, she had managed to reach the upper stage of the Meditative (zuozhao) Realm. If the yao race's advancement is similar to that of a human's, then she is probably also on the verge of entering a perilous stage of her cultivation.

Thinking up this point, Chen Chang Sheng began having feelings of regret and trepidation; if something were to happen to Luo Luo, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. He now had a deeper understanding of entering the Ethereal Opening (tungyou) realm, and more importantly, he also had medicine.

Having thought of this, he immediately got up and raced towards the small wooden lodging at the front entrance and asked Jin Yu Lu, "When will Luo Luo... Her Highness get to leave Li Palace and go outside?"

Jin Yu Lu, who was in the midst of drinking, found Chang Sheng's actions to be rather puzzling. He lightly squinted his eyes while passing ginkgo seeds to his mouth and asked, "What's wrong?"

Chen Chang Sheng saw Yu Lu's expression and thought to himself that it must be troublesome to arrange matters and said, "I have something I need to tell her, therefore I need to see her... if it's not possible, then could I trouble Your Grace to help me pass on a letter?".

Jin Yu Lu threw the seeds into his mouth, and while chewing, he answered in a murmuring and muddled voice, “That’s all?”

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly confused, what did he mean by “that’s all”?

“If you want to see her, then just go, there’s no need for me to pass on a letter.”

Jin Yu Lu raised his wine cup and drank it in a single gulp and subsequently began clacking his tongue at the burning sensation.

Chen Chang Sheng became even more confused, staring blankly and questioning, “I’m... allowed to see her?”

“Her Highness is at Li Palace and therefore she cannot leave, this is for her own personal safety, but you are Her Highness’ tutor and therefore not a threat. If you want to see her, then go to Li Palace, who would stop you?”

“Your Grace, why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“You never seem to leave the grounds of this school, so I presumed you wished to concentrate on your own cultivation.”

“Your Grace...”

“What is it?”

“I... thank you...”

“I’m not feeling any sense of gratitude.”

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It was already late and therefore unsuitable for travelling to Li Palace, thus, the next morning, in the early hours, scant before the fifth hour, Chen Chang Sheng took a break from his usual routine and woke up early. He then roused Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po from their respective slumber and used rousing scents on Jin Yu Lu, who was still feeling the aftereffects of his drinking.

Metallic wheels, rolling upon the azure stones, sending out a clackety racket as a horse-drawn carriage rolled by, its passengers: two humans and two yao, headed towards Li Palace.

Li Palace was the residence of the Pope and the heart of the Orthodoxy, it had also long been held as an equal to the Imperial Palace. Situated in the Western sector, it covered a vast expanse that was visible from even a distance of over 10 li; from New North Bridge, you could still make its countenance.

The Orthodoxy was founded in the year 1573 of the Radiant Calendar; something that was already 800 years ago.

Yet, from the time the Heavenly Tomes descended, and the door to the Radiant Path first opened to the continent, its history could be considered over 10,000 years in length.

Li Palace, as a monument to the Orthodoxy, was naturally sublime.

The palace complex occupied an expanse that was seemingly endless, with a divine avenue that was wide enough to accommodate the passage of eight carriages running side-by-side. The main palace where the Pope resided was situated in the deepest region, with an expansive white stone clearing before it, littered with dozens of lesser buildings and structures that collectively formed the wider complex.

Li Palace College was also situated within this palace complex, but it was structured slightly differently from what people would normally expect. Temple Seminary and the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green, which were fellow members of the 6 Ivy League schools were also located here. Neighbouring each other, like a single unit and body, caused the palace to be occasionally referred to as 'Academy City' by some.

A noted attraction of the Capital, the 'Li Palace Ivy', was partially referring to the three schools that were linked together by a single wall that was bounded in seemingly endless vines. Though the main attraction referred to the greenery surrounding the main palace of the Pope.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others left Orthodox Academy before the skies had even begun to brighten. By the time they reached Li

Palace, it was half past five, which was the time for morning meals, Jin Yu Lu marvelled at the youth's scheduling of time and couldn't stop himself shaking his head while smiling in bemusement.

At the outermost perimeter of Li Palace, there were countless stone pillars of a height beyond 30 odd metres, with a width that would require several men to completely encircle. Each pillar was distanced hundreds of metres from each other and upon a cursory glance from afar, seemingly ordinary, yet from a close distance, the uniformity of the pillars gave a sense of indescribable grandeur.

Upon getting closer to the pillars, Xuan Yuan Po discovered that the pillars did not contain a single seam or joint, and became mildly slack-jawed with awe; each pillar was carved in whole from a single piece of rock. From where did the crafters of these pillars find such large, flawless rock in the quantities needed, and how did they manage to transport said rocks to the Capital?

With the morning wind flowing across, and rays of sunshine streaming from above; the stone pillars with nothing in between them; above the pillars was nothing except the empty skies, akin to nothing being able to obstruct their reach to the heavens above. Occasionally a stray bird would flutter across, yet this could do nothing to detract from the calm scene before them.

Yet, these pillars were the entrance to Li Palace.

If someone were to enter the palace grounds without permission, or after the grounds were closed, they would activate the wards that are in place, though what kind of wards were placed, is a

mystery to all, since for countless years, no one has dared to trespass Li Palace, with the last time the wards were triggered being too distant for memory.

The stone pillars did not prevent the passage of Chen Chang Sheng's group, upon handing over their documents, they were quickly granted entry. Those guarding the entrance did however pass strange glances over the group, their curiosity driven by the fact that Chen Chang Sheng's documents indicated they were from Orthodox Academy.

Orthodox Academy, the name was an obvious indicator of its relationship to the Orthodoxy. But this was history of decades past; since the previous principal's involvement in the Imperial Chen clan's rebellion and the school's subsequent repression by the Pope, this relationship had long since broken.

This was the first time in years that the school had appeared before Li Palace. The three students of this school were already infamous in the Capital, not to mention their equally infamous doorkeeper, Jin Yu Lu.

Morning rays blanketed the stone pillar's upper region, faintly highlighting some patterns.

Chen Chang Sheng had previously applied at Temple Seminary, but the location was the River Wang (View) Branch, prepared especially for applicants, so this was his first time being here.

He retracted his gaze and followed Jin Yu Lu, heading forwards

onto the divine avenue. Both sides of the avenue was lined a multitude of trees, though it was the height of Autumn, and fallen leaves had stripped branches bare, it was still difficult to gaze past the thick of trees to see the view beyond.

Half past five, the morning meal of Li Palace, was also the time when the students of Li Palace College, Temple Seminary and the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green would have their morning cultivation practice.

Far away, near the walls of the complex, faint sounds drifted by of book recitals, from the two sides of the divine avenue, sword qi swept through the air, alarming countless birds. Alternating auras of chill and heat also streamed through the woods.

Tang Thirty-Six upon seeing the flashes of swords, could feel the familiar presence, which roused his interest. Amongst the students practising their morning cultivation, there were a lot of talented individuals, amongst them, he could also sense the presence of a few that were by no means weaker than himself, only, he couldn't tell which school they were from.

Chen Chang Sheng, as wont his appreciation of time and learning, was also interested in the scene before him, even going as far as to nudging slightly closer towards the place of interest. But upon remembering the matter of Luo Luo, he didn't still his step so that he may observe further, but rather, increased his pace, heading towards the end of the divine avenue and the grand palace that laid ahead.

Suddenly, he stopped.

Jin Yu Lu and the other two youths also came to a stop.

This was because something strange had occurred.

On the two sides of the divine avenue, parallel to their position, where there were originally a flurry of sounds from blades slicing through the air, was suddenly strangely quiet.

Chen Chang Sheng looked off the side of the avenue path and continued advancing forwards, with Jin Yu Lu and the others following on.

In step with their own, the sounds from both sides of the avenue also slowly came to a stop, wherever they went, silence followed.

Akin to wind through the woods, bringing along a message; akin to a strange atmosphere slowly spreading.

As the group reached the half-way point of the avenue, with a fair distance still separating them from the dome-like palace ahead, the two sides surrounding the divine avenue was already completely silent. Subsequently, a murmuring started, not the buzzing of springtime caterpillars feeding on the leaves of mulberry trees, but the sound of a multitude of footsteps.

Hundreds of young men and women came out of the woods, standing on the two sides of the divine avenue, gazing upon the group of Chen Chang Sheng.

These people were students from Temple Seminary, the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green and Li Palace College.

Their lining was obviously not a welcome, but observance.

The gazes were varied in their emotions, including curiosity, vigil, disdain or loathing.

At the Ivy League gathering, with Orthodox Academy having won against the Li Shan Sword Sect, alongside the revelation Xu You Rong's betrothal, Chen Chang Sheng was already famous. Students that didn't participate in the Ivy League gathering were incredibly curious of Chen Chang Sheng.

Since Orthodox Academy was off-limits, and Chen Chang Sheng's group didn't leave, there wasn't any chance of approaching Chang Sheng's group. Upon hearing the news of students from said school were visiting Li Palace, including Chen Chang Sheng, they were scantily going to let this chance slip by.

They wanted to see for themselves the visage of Chen Chang Sheng, what kind of person was he, to want to marry Xu You Rong!

Yet, there were also a lot of gazes on Tang Thirty-Six, though these gazes had different emotions behind them than those that were gazing on Chen Chang Sheng. The gazes were mainly filled with adulation, with the majority stemming from female students of the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green.

A young genius from the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, the young master of an established clan, dashing features, and an icy-cool attitude, no matter what angle you approached this from, Tang Thirty-Six was the manifestation of a maiden's fantasy. If one were to also include the fact that the Wen Shui Tang family had a wealth that was even the envy of the government, Tang Thirty-Six's status in the hearts of these girls was possibly even above that of Gou Han Shi.

Tang Thirty-Six's expression was ice cold, with an unwavering gaze, a look of indescribable pride and elegance. Yet this look, aroused the fancy of several girls, almost prompting them to release excited cries. Chen Chang Sheng and Xuan Yuan Po were slightly surprised, being used to seeing his lazy and mischievous side, they had almost forgotten that he was celebrity.

The gazes of the girls filled with adulation, lessened the effect of any hostility that was creeping in and out of the gazes from both sides of the divine avenue. Chen Cheng Sheng calmed himself, ignoring the hostile stares landing upon him, and quietly carried on forwards, that invisible pressure was something only the one experiencing it can truly understand.

They first passed the woods directly outside of Temple Seminary, the gazes of students from this school were the most hostile.

Tian Hai Ya'er was not a particularly likeable person, but he was still a student of Temple Seminary, students and teachers alike of the school were relying upon him to stun the world in the following year's Grand Examination. Yet the result was his

crippling at the hands of Luo Luo, after the Ivy League gathering, discussions in the Capital were particularly harsh on Temple Seminary, it, alongside Li Shan Sword Sect, were the two biggest losers of the incident.

The teachers and students of Temple Seminary didn't dare to touch Luo Luo, therefore their grudges could only fall upon Orthodox Academy, or more specifically, upon Chen Chang Sheng's group.

Chen Chang Sheng ignored the gazes and passed by the grounds of Temple Seminary.

Suddenly, at that moment, a sound arose from the group of people at the side of the divine avenue.

“So it's only someone that can't even finish their Purification.”

Chapter 106 – Crossing The Divine Avenue

Due to the fervent gazes of the female students, Tang Thirty-Six had to continue maintaining his look of icy refinement, upon hearing what words were uttered, his expression deepened further, with a steely gaze directed towards the source of those words and confirming that they were uttered by a student of Temple Seminary.

Chen Chang Sheng extended an arm to block his advancement, shaking his head while doing so.

His purpose for coming to Li Palace today, was to meet Luo Luo about an important matter, he had no time for delays.

Though he couldn't completely ignore the slights, he wasn't about to erupt in fury over them. Anger, envy, grievances, heart-ache, sadness... all of these emotions were detrimental to health and a waste of time, and thus held little value to him.

Tang Thirty-Six gave the Temple Seminary group a cold stare before following Chen Chang Sheng onwards.

Jeering started coming from amongst Temple Seminary group, unhappy at the implications of warning from Tang's stare, with one person exclaiming: "The truth is the truth, are we not allowed to state the truth? Orthodox Academy only restarted accepting students this year, yet you think you can oppress others like Heavenly Academy?"

Seeing Chen Chang Shen's continued indifference, Tang Thirty-Six took a deep breath and decided to ignore the taunts, "I'll treat it like as if I am deaf today, but after finishing our business at Li Palace, if there are still people who dare to taunt me, I'll be dealing with them then."

In the palace complex ahead, Temple Seminary, Li Palace College and the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green were connected by a single wall and bell tolls could be heard by all. Not long after passing Temple Seminary, they approached the entrance to Li Palace College.

Here, the two sides of the divine avenue was lined with green pagoda trees that didn't shed leaves in Autumn, the surroundings were blanketed in a haze of green, a fitting match for the status of the school.

News of a visit from Orthodox Academy had already spread across the campuses of the three schools, resulting in an ever increasing number of people rushing out from their respective campuses and arriving at the divine avenue. Curious onlookers on both sides of the avenue gazed towards Chen Chang Sheng's group, with the Western side being especially crowded, creating a rather impressive spectacle.

Students of Li Palace College were especially numerous, standing under the pagoda trees, staring at the group from Orthodox Academy, who were calmly advancing across the avenue. Some of the students couldn't help but admire their actions, were it to be themselves, with how much difficulty would they be able handle the pressure of so many stares and yet maintain such a steady

pace?

“Senior Su has arrived!”

This caused a slight commotion amongst the students of Li Palace College, with younger students automatically moving aside to create a pathway.

A single youth, a clergyman, with an air of quiet and refined elegance emerged from the opened path, arriving at the divine avenue.

This youthful clergyman was representative of this generation’s students for Li Palace College. His standing in this school was comparable to that of Zhuang Huan Yu at Heavenly Academy. In the recent Ivy League gathering’s second round, he was the one who achieved first place.

Achieving first place in the martial round of the Ivy League gathering was supposed to be a very prestigious achievement, yet sadly, for this year’s gathering, Luo Luo crippled Tian Hai Ya’er in the first round, while the third round was dominated by several brilliant battles. Orthodox Academy had usurped all the glory and subsequently, very little attention was paid to the results of the martial round.

Even though Su Mo Yu didn’t express any of his thoughts on the matter, he was still of the younger generation and couldn’t have been pleased with the results.

“Gou Han Shi... was actually incapable of dealing with this person?”

Having observed the ordinary looking youth on the divine avenue, he found himself confused and said: “Could it be... the Council of Divine Ordinance (Tian Ji Ge) were wrong on their evaluation of Gou Han Shi?”

In preparation of breaking through the upper stage of the Meditative Realm, he had to preserve his True Essence to use alongside medications supplied by his teacher. Due to this, he didn't attend the third night of the Ivy League gathering at the imperial palace, missing the chance to witness the bout between Orthodox Academy and Li Shan Sect. Only obtaining accounts through his other senior students and peers.

Though he had heard a lot of accounts about what happened, he still couldn't understand how they managed to obtain victory against Li Shan Sword Sect. Especially the youth named Chen Chang Sheng, how did he manage to go toe to toe against Gou Han Shi?

Having finally seen Chen Chang Shen in person, he could confirm that he had yet to successfully achieve Purification. Without a successful Purification, no matter how mature or learned one may be, you cannot understand the intricacies of heaven and earth, let alone develop a strong spiritual sense. Yet Gou Han Shi still couldn't achieve victory in the end...

Therefore he could only conclude that Gou Han Shi was not as able as rumoured.

“Senior Su’s words ring true, I dare say, in the coming Grand Examination, if senior were to be suitably cautious, there shouldn’t any problem in overcoming Gou Han Shi.”

Other students of the school uttered their endorsements of this view, yet, these were all learned people, and Gou Han Shi was doubtlessly still a member of the Seven Laws of the Divine Nation and ranked second amongst their number. Having managed to leave the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and leaving his golden mark upon the clear heavens (referring to his ranking on the Proclamation of Golden Distinction), he was naturally a gifted individual. Thus, they were measured in their encouragement to Su Mo Yu.

They were not so kind, however, in regards to the people of Orthodox Academy.

“That Chen Chang Sheng can’t even successfully complete his Purification, the Ivy League gathering was probably just a fluke.”

The Li Palace College student said, while looking at Chen Chang Sheng and shaking their head.

After observing female students of the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green and some of the female students from his own school staring in adulation at the fluttering green garments of the youth from Orthodox Academy, the student churlishly added: “In my view, that Tang Thirty-Six is also nothing more than a sham.”

Su Mo Yu, lightly frowned, replying in refutation: “If I am not incorrect, the three members of Orthodox Academy who will participate in next year’s Grand Examination, will all be strong competitors. Your attitude of putting down others is not a good thing, Tang Tang is not someone you should underestimate.”

The fellow student knew of his senior’s adherence to propriety and quickly answered: “Senior’s instruction is correct.”

Su Mo Yu knew from his fellow student’s expression that he was merely being paid lip service and shook his head while stating: “At the Ivy League gathering, the Orthodox Academy being able to triumph over Li Shan Sword Sect was unexpected... but why was this? Chen Chang Sheng is obviously not as strong as Gou Han Shi, but Her Highness, Princess Luo Luo, is a pinnacle of strength, while Tang Thirty-Six is also very strong.”

“The most important point is that I trust the rankings on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.”

Turning to look at Tang Thirty-Six, he continued: “If the Council of Divine Ordinance ranked him at thirty six, then there’s mistaking his worthiness for that ranking.”

“As strong as that may be, it still is only ranking 36th.”

The fellow student turned to Su Mo Yu and continued, pensively praiseful: “Senior is ranked at 33rd, he is still weaker than you are.”

Su Mo Yu uttered a laugh, yet did not answer.

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Chen Chang Sheng was rushing to meet up with Luo Luo and reluctant to continue being delayed, thus Tang Thirty-Six could only allow the slights to fall on deaf ears in order to avoid creating a fuss, yet things in life are oft to go wry; when you wish for peace and quiet, trouble tends to find ways to catch up to you.

Though they had already reached Li Palace College, the Temple Seminary group from behind once again kicked-up a fuss.

“Some cur that can’t even complete Purification, what makes you think you’re worthy of marrying Xu You Rong!”

A loud, cracking sound accompanied the sudden stopping of Tang Thirty-Six’s step.

Chen Chang Sheng continued forwards, with not a single change to his pacing and said: “Just random barking, yet you seek to contend with them?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked towards the unturned back of Chen Chang Sheng and answered: “Obviously not, let’s just look for some rocks to smash.”

Chen Chang Sheng stopped, turned around and answered: “This divine avenue is well maintained, just like Hundred Blossom Lane, where are you going to find rocks?”

Tang Thirty-Six knew what he was referring to and couldn’t stop himself laughing after remembering the “busybody urbanites” incident that happened the other day. He shook his head several times while drawing in some deep breaths, then went to the side of Chen Chang Sheng and said: “I initially thought there wouldn’t be any more naysayers after that day.”

“What if Her Divine Majesty was to be the one saying these words, what could you do about it?”

Chen Chang Sheng patted Tang’s sides, consoling him: “... just ignore them.”

“I’m not really feeling the effects of your consoling here.” Tang Thirty-Six said, after some consideration.

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After finding the lack of any reaction from the Orthodox Academy group, including the much rumoured hothead Tang Thirty-Six, the Temple Seminary group intensified their jeers: “So the people from Orthodox Academy are just a bunch of wimps.”

Chen Chang Sheng continued to ignore the taunts, Xuan Yuan Po

followed his attitude, Tang Thirty-Six made himself oblivious, while Jin Yu Lu observed from the sidelines in amusement.

Tang Thirty-Six took a look at his smiling face and couldn't continue feigning obliviousness, asking: "You're not going to do anything?"

Jin Yu Lu answered while continuing to smile: "I'm only a doorkeeper, and the doorway to Orthodox Academy isn't located here."

A student of Temple Seminary decided to be more straightforward and just ran out of the crowd, crying out towards the backs of Chen Chang Sheng's group: "Chen Chang Sheng! You stupid coward! Do you dare to have a match against me?!"

Tang Thirty-Six didn't even bother turning around, and while shaking his head, said something in a tone that could only be heard by the others near him: "simpleton."

"I'm sorry," Chen Chang Sheng said, while patting Tang's sides apologetically.

After seeing the continued lack of any reaction from the Orthodox Academy group, the Temple Seminary student snickered a few times before finally quieting down.

Following the divine avenue, Chen Chang Sheng and the others continued advancing, continually getting closer to the palace

ahead and were close enough to make sight of the steps leading to the palace. The trees planted here were no longer green pagoda trees, but were evergreen trees that continued to flutter in an abundance of green, tinged with a hint of the chill of the season.

The Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green, this school wasn't as prestigious as Li Palace College, but due to the majority of its student body being comprised of females, the Orthodoxy's Education Board decided to provide a more central location for its campus in to avoid disturbances.

Under the evergreen trees, students of the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green observed them.

The majority of their attention was directed towards Tang Thirty-Six, though their expressions were rather ardent, they were reluctant to break modesty, flitting their gaze to the sides occasionally, adding an allusive sense of cute tenderness to their actions. Even though Tang Thirty-Six was infuriated by the earlier actions of Temple Seminary, at this moment his expression softened somewhat.

Opposite to the location of the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green, there was a quiet-looking campus comprised of several small buildings, which were unlike the other buildings of the palace complex that had imposing architectural designs. The campus conveyed a sense of beautiful serenity to the observer, this was the Li Palace guesthouse; envoys of the Southern States who were to participate in the Grand Examination were currently staying at this location.

Remembering that the groups from Li Shan Sword Sect and Holy Maiden Peak were currently staying at this campus, Chen Chang Sheng unconsciously turned his head around to take a look. Under the Cedrus trees he saw a group of young girls that were presumably disciples of Holy Maiden Peak, but there was no sight of disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect.

Li Shan Sword Sect was a branch of the Longevity Sect, while Holy Maiden Peak's most important branch was the Nan Xi Institute (Southern Creeks Institute), more accurately, the Nan Xi Institute was of its inner circle. To have been chosen to participate in the coming Grand Examination, these young maidens were probably mainly disciples from the Nan Xi Institute and of a high level in their cultivation.

Thinking that these girls were probably fellow disciples of Xu You Rong from the same sect that had spent a considerable amount of time with her, Chen Chang Sheng was suddenly faced with an awkward situation he didn't know how to handle. As the fiancé of Xu You Rong, would it not be customary for him to greet them?

When he looked at the disciples of the Nan Xi Institute, they were also looking at him; as fellow disciples of Xu You Rong, they were obviously curious about this youth.

Chapter 107 – A Battle Of Words

Having met eyes with each other, it was no longer possible to feign ignorance, Chen Chang Sheng lightly nodded his head in greeting. Under the Cedrus tree, an older disciple of Holy Maiden Peak lightly nodded in reply, though the motion was minute, it was enough to express courtesy, prompting the other disciples to return greetings to Chen Chang Sheng in turn.

A lone girl, whose face still conveyed remnants of childishness, remained motionless while maintaining a cold expression and cool gaze towards Chen Chang Sheng. The previous older disciple, who was probably her senior, whispered a few words to the girl, yet afterwards, the girl erupted in annoyance, stating: “Will senior You Rong marry this person? It’s obviously no, so why should I greet him?”

Upon hearing this, the other disciples were at a lost, how should they answer? The older disciple was just as bewildered and rushed to the side to reason with her, this fell upon deaf ears however and the girl turned to Chen Chang Sheng with a cold smirk while saying: “A little toad wishes to dine on the Phoenix? That type of delusional fool isn’t someone we should pay any attention to, Senior should be ignoring him too.”

Her words were intentionally loud and clear, in order to put Chen Chang Sheng’s group into hearing range. Initially, Chen Chang Sheng had presumed her to be just a little girl and did not need to care for her words, but upon the utterance of the last line, he had no choice but to stop; Tang Thirty-Six refused to continue forwards.

The girl had an exceedingly young looking face, and an age to match, yet who could have guessed she would be so callous with her words? Her voice carried a fair distance; the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green opposite were restrained in their reactions, conversely, students from Temple Seminary and Li Palace College who were situated farther away, all erupted in bouts of heavy laughter.

The Li Palace's divine avenue was a long, straight path, Tang Thirty-Six had already endured the gazes of a multitude of students and the barbs from Temple Seminary students for quite some time, upon hearing the callous words of this girl and the subsequent mocking laughter; he had already reached his limit.

Hearing laughter from both sides of the divine avenue, the girl was further emboldened, delighting in the response. She turned to Chen Chang Sheng, made a sound of indignation, and then turned to her senior: "Do you hear that? Even these people of Zhou (country) agree with me."

Early mornings at Li Palace are very quiet, causing the sounds of laughter to reverberate throughout the palace at an ear-piercing volume.

The reason for students of Temple Seminary and Li Palace College having such a strong reaction to the girl's callous words was because the phrase, "a little toad wishes to dine on the Phoenix", was currently the biggest joke in the city, alluding to the engagement between Chen Chang Sheng and Xu You Rong.

No one dared to approach the doors of Orthodox Academy to say these words and were thus also unable to say these words to Chen Chang Sheng's face, for this girl to say these words today, students that enjoyed inciting incidents couldn't let this chance slip by without fanning the flames.

"I daresay... such a phrase should be officially recorded, so that it may become a proverb for the people of this continent."

A voice from amongst the Temple Seminary group sounded, it was unclear if it was the same person from before, yet nonetheless it aroused another burst of laughter.

Chen Chang Sheng shifted his gaze towards the girl under the Cedrus tree; seeing her childish face, he estimated her to be around 12 years of age, an age not too different from that of Luo Luo, causing him to feel hesitant.

The older disciple from Holy Maiden Peak expressed an apology towards him.

The girl met Chen Chang Sheng's gaze indifferently and responded with a cold laugh: "What? Have I said anything that's a lie?"

Chen Chang Sheng quietly considered for a while, then replied: "Your words are correct."

The girl looked at him in disdain, "So where am I wrong then? In

what way are you worthy of Senior You Rong?”

“She might really be a Phoenix.”

Chen Chang Sheng said.

“But I am most definitely not a toad.”

He was also going to express that the toad wasn't interested in the Phoenix, but was interrupted by the girl, who mockingly said: “Oh, so you're not a toad because you say you're not? Then who were they all laughing at?”

“I do not know who they were laughing at.”

Chen Chang Sheng suddenly shifted his gaze towards the deeper regions of the Cedrus trees, stating: “But I do know someone that will disagree with the idea of me being a toad.”

Unknown to all, the doors to a guesthouse had been opened and from inside, Gou Han Shi and his three junior disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect emerged, they crossed the woods and arrived at the divine avenue.

Gou Han Shi managed to hear the girl's previous words and understood the allusions behind them, his expression was hard to read, as he shook his head and said: “You're naturally not a toad, if you were, then what would that make me?”

The laughter suddenly subsided, leaving a wake of silence.

At the Ivy League gathering, Orthodox Academy triumphed over Li Shan Sword Sect, anyone that was present at the time, knew of the key figure behind that victory.

Though it could not be said that Chen Chang Sheng was stronger than Gou Han Shi, he was undeniably capable of standing up to him.

If he were to be a toad, then what would that make Gou Han Shi? What of the Divine State's Seven Laws?

Laughing at Chen Chang Sheng was therefore no different from mocking Li Shan Sword Sect?

Subsequently, no one dared to raise their voice again, let alone laugh, the girl from Holy Maiden Peak became flustered while looking at Gou Han Shi and wanted to open her mouth to give an explanation, yet words would not come.

Amidst the Li Palace College group, Su Mo Yu who was watching from the side lightly crossed his eyebrows in a frown, he couldn't understand, why did Gou Han Shi make an appearance to defend Chen Chang Sheng?

The reason for this was only privy to Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi; apart from needing to express the magnanimity of the Li

Shan Sword Sect, considerations also had to be paid towards the state of Qiu Shan Jun. Chen Chang Sheng and Xu You Rong were betrothed to each other, all Qiu Shan Jun could do was to observe them from a distance, therefore this event couldn't be allowed to become too much of a mockery.

A beautiful silence enveloped the evergreens.

Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi exchanged formal greetings (揖礼) towards each other.

Subsequently, no one paid any further attention to the girl from Holy Maiden Peak, including her seniors, but the quietness of the surroundings cause her to become anxious; offending a senior from the Longevity Sect was an unthinkable situation for her, further increasing her anxiety. Near bursting into tears, she said: "I... I didn't mean that, this... this person can't even cultivate properly, isn't he nothing more than trash?"

Upon these words, the atmosphere once again turned heavy.

Guan Fei Bai raised his eyebrow, finding the actions of the girl distasteful; the fifth Law, Liang Ban Hu, shook his head; even Qi Jian, who only cared about cultivating The Way and cared little for worldly affairs, thought her actions crossed the line, he turned his gaze towards Gou Han Shi, hoping that his senior would handle this affair.

Gou Han Shi had a gloomy expression, yet did nothing. Though disciples from the Southern schools all referred to each other with

the greetings of senior and junior, akin to being from a single body and school, they were still independent of each other. As the second disciple of the Longevity Sect, he had no right to interfere with Holy Maiden Peak and its matters.

Though there was someone that didn't care about interfering.

“I'm rather curious as to why you loathe Chen Chang Shang so much... though admittedly, he is rather annoying at times.” Tang Thirty-Six suddenly interjected.

The girl only continued to glare at Chen Chang Sheng, ignoring the question.

Tang Thirty-Six continued, “No matter how gifted you may be, you cannot possibly be a match for the Phoenix, putting aside your personality, you're still too young to be a disciple of the Nan Xi Institute, so you must be a disciple associated with Holy Maiden Peak? I would guess... a disciple of Ci Jian Temple?”

Hearing him mention her personality, the girl was mortified and wanted to refute him, what was wrong with her personality? Yet upon hearing those last few words, she felt stunned, Holy Maiden Peak had over a dozen schools and sects, how did he manage to guess that she came from Ci Jian Temple?

“That's right, I'm called Ye Xiao Lian, a younger disciple of Ci Jian Temple, once I'm old enough next year, I'll be entering the Nan Xi Institute, what of it?”

She faced Tang Thirty-Six with her small face, not caring to temper her look of pride and guarded vigilance.

Tang Thirty-Six interjected: “Ci Jian Temple, is it not rather near Li Mountain?”

Guan Fei Bai was taken aback with these words, thinking to himself that this person wasn’t from the South, yet why did he know so much about the region?

“The Longevity Sect comprises of several mountain ranges, with Li Shan being the highest, situated besides Ci Jian Temple. I would presume you often get to see Qiu Shan Jun’s countenance?”

Tang Thirty-Six continued, not giving her a chance to reply: “A figure such as Qiu Shan Jun, it’s not hard to imagine someone falling for him after seeing him so many times. You’re still young, yet your heart has already been taken, so why do you hate Chen Chang Sheng? Well, the fact is, in this case, Chen Chang Sheng got the better of him.”

“Nonsense!” the girl countered, with mortified expression.

Gou Han Shi was also unable to continue listening, shaking his head and saying: “This is preposterous.”

Ye Xiao Lian, with a bright red face, responded in a reprimanding manner: “My loathing has nothing to do with Senior, I’m only angry about Senior You Rong getting tarnished.”

“There’s no need to lie, some girls may have such a caring personality, but you? I think not, rather, the thought of your Senior, You Rong, being married off to a toad would probably delight you enough to cause you to smile while sleeping.”

Ye Xiao Lian was stunned, “I couldn’t possibly be thinking that.”

She was undeniably still just a 12 year old girl, her expression before the eyes of others was already confirmation enough of her thoughts, causing the other disciples of Holy Maiden Peak to cross their eyebrows in a frown.

Tang Thirty-Six was expressionless throughout his conjecture, adding to the seriousness of his speech and enhancing its effect, “Only, Qiu Shan Jun is still your idol, for him to lose to Chen Chang Sheng in vying for a girl, if I were you, I would also be incensed.”

Upon hearing this, Chen Chang Sheng shook his head, thinking he had gone too far.

The expressions of Gou Han Shi and his group also became rather sombre.

“He’s nowhere near a match against Senior.”

Ye Xiao Lian’s voice became increasingly incensed, nailing Tang Thirty-Six with her eyes she replied: “I just don’t understand, why

did Senior You Rong have to write a letter, a letter that places this trash on the same level as Senior Qiu Shan, didn't she think that that's nothing more than an insult to Senior?"

"Oh, so it's not Chen Chang Sheng you loathe, but rather... your Senior You Rong"

Tang Thirty-Six didn't feign an expression of sudden enlightenment, this was not his purpose, he calmly continued: "Then can you still deny liking Qiu Shan Jun?"

A silence enveloped the divine avenue, with gazes from the audience towards the girl being rather complicated.

Ye Xiao Lian flustered, before gradually coming to a realisation that her inner thoughts had been seen through, her face turned bright red, the corners of her eyes became moist, giving the impression of impending tears, she was evidently heavily disturbed.

"There's no need to be upset, with a figure such as Qiu Shan Jun, it's natural to fall for him."

"Because you understand that you're not worthy of having Qiu Shan Jun... in fact, for the past two years, amongst the human realm, everyone has been questioning this. It would seem that only Qiu Shan Jun has the qualifications to like Xu You Rong, and only Xu You Rong has the qualifications to like Qiu Shan Jun. Therefore the mocking of Chen Chang Sheng is correct, the current stares of those judging you are not."

Tang Thirty-Six turned to face the crowd, calmly stating: “In truth, you are not in the wrong, liking someone is not a sin, the ones who are wrong are these people, what right do you have to deny love? Just because none of you dare to love, therefore others also lack this right? Preposterous.”

“Therefore, you shouldn’t harbour any hate for Chen Chang Sheng, conversely, you should feel empathy for someone in the same situation as you.”

Ye Xiao Lian raised her head, rubbing away her tears and upon seeing the unfriendly stares directed at her, she finally understood his words.

The surroundings were blanketed with silence, for, even though Tang Thirty-Six was overly blunt with his words, they still rung true.

Only Chen Chang Sheng thought differently to himself, after all, he didn’t like Xu You Rong, though he was obviously not going to clarify this in front of everyone. Xu You Rong helped him on the night of the Ivy League gathering with her letter, he was not about to complicate things for her needlessly.

The early morning breeze brushed pass the trees, scattering the morning light; as the temperature slowly rose, the autumn air began tempering somewhat.

The gathered students looked at Tang Thirty-Six with

lamentation in their hearts, thinking that he lived up his status of being from an established family, having the gentle and calm flair of the dignitary. Being able to placate the young junior from Holy Maiden Peak in such a simple manner, in turn, this caused the fervent stares of students from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green to renew in their intensity.

Thus, everyone thought this incident would come to an end, a happy and complete ending...

Tang Thirty-Six turned around, and once again turned his gaze towards Ye Xiao Lian.

“But... to be honest... you’re not really the same as Chen Chang Sheng.”

“He has an engagement to Xu You Rong, not just liking, even if they were to hold hands and run off to see the sunset, no one would be able to say anything. But between you and Qiu Shan Jun there doesn’t exist a sliver of a relationship, not to mention the entire continent is aware of the fact that his heart already leans toward Xu You Rong. Just because of liking Qiu Shan Jun, you came to insult Chen Chang Sheng? Where’s the reason in that?

“If he were trash... then wouldn’t you just be... a little slut?”

His words were spoken as calmly as ever, with the last three words carefully enunciated to ensure there could be no mistaking what was said.

The entire scene, erupted in a massive outcry!

Ye Xiao Lian let out a single cry and covered her face as she ran back into the woods while sobbing.

The disciples of Holy Maiden Peak gave him a few hard stares, then turned and left. Students of the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green who had previously looked at him with adulation also had a change in expression. Who would have thought, that previous exchange, those moving words, all were naught but a preparation for those final three words!

Jin Yu Lu and Xuan Yuan Po who had been listening on the side all this time affirmed to themselves, humans really are cunning and shameless; unworthy of trust. After this incident, Xuan Yuan Po unconsciously edged closer towards Chen Chang Sheng, unwilling to remain too close to Tang Thirty-Six; Jin Yu Lu sighed and said: “You’re the real trash here.”

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t know what to say and turned to gesture his farewell to Gou Han Shi. Though the words of Tang Thirty-Six were callous and low, they didn’t concern the Longevity Sect, therefore Gou Han Shi only shook his head, and returned the gesture before taking his juniors and returning to their lodgings.

Though no one approved of the actions of the girl from Holy Maiden Peak, she was still just a girl of 12 years, seeing her race away in a fluster of tears was enough to draw pity from a lot of the younger male students. They felt like she had been wronged, and where there is a wrong, it is only proper to speak out against it.

“A person who only knows how to bully a child through their words.”

From the group of Li Palace College students, Su Mo Yu remained silent. In truth, he was feeling rather disappointed, talks had been abound of Orthodox Academy's revival, yet from what he saw today...

Chen Chang Sheng who was afraid Tang Thirty-Six would delay them further, urged them onwards: “Let's go.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked towards the group of students and quickly said, “After I've finished, I'll be back, if you've the guts, stay here.”

The students were once again in an uproar, this is Li Palace, the location of their schools. This wasn't Orthodox Academy, for him to bully a little girl and then continue to display such arrogance, was simply an invitation for them to beat him to a pulp.

At this moment, from the deeper regions of the complex, the clear sound of a bell could be heard chiming, within the chimes were the faintest hint of admonishment.

Chapter 108 – A Blossom A World

“Count yourself lucky, if you’ve the guts, then don’t sneak away after.”

Upon hearing peals of the bell and the chiding of their teachers, even the most infuriated of students could only stop their actions towards chasing Chen Chang Sheng’s group. After throwing out a few curses, they all began returning to their respective schools... classes were about to begin.

At the end of the divine avenue was a set of steps, roughly a thousand in number; the steps were made of white jade and smooth as the surface of a mirror. The dome-like palace that was previously visible from a distance, was situated at the top these stairs, this building was not the main Li Palace estate, but the Hall of Clear Virtue.

Standing from the bottom of the stairs, while gazing up at the grand and towering construct, only further enhanced its sense of majesty.

“Why did you have to add those last few words?”

The stairs were arduously long, yet it was forbidden to use abilities within the grounds of the palace, therefore they could only slowly progress onwards. Upon remembering the uproar they just left behind, Chen Chang Sheng couldn’t help himself asking: “How are we supposed to leave once we’re finished here? Or do you really expect us to fight our way out?”

Xuan Yuan Po was a forthright and courageous yao youth, but he wasn't stupid, after checking out the surroundings, he asked: "Who knows where the back entrance is?"

"There's no need to worry, you guys may not know how to fight, but I'm not scared." Replied Tang Thirty-Six.

"Even if Gou Han Shi and the others don't make an appearance; Li Palace College, Temple Seminary, alongside other experts that are ranked on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds notwithstanding; no matter how good you are at fighting, are really going to go against thousands alone?"

"His Grace, Secretary-General Jin, also needs to return to Orthodox Academy, though it might be wrong for the strong to bully the weak, surely his venerable self wouldn't just stand by and watch us get pummelled to death?"

Jin Yu Lu only smiled in response.

Chen Chang Sheng felt exasperated and said: "Were Secretary-General Jin to take action, wouldn't the teachers and possibly even principals also intervene?"

Tang Thirty-Six countered: "If the principals got involved, there wouldn't even be any fighting."

Chen Chang Sheng was speechless; Xuan Yuan Po muttered: "You

humans are way too sly.”

“Regardless, your words to that girl were far too heartless.”

“Oh? Please tell me, for whom was I helping? You’re the one that’s heartless.”

“Fine, fine. I’m the one in the wrong.”

“Apology accepted.”

“But I still don’t quite understand, from our first meeting at Heavenly Academy, to our meeting at the inn, you are now completely different. From having a reputation for being cold and asocial, you’re now garrulous, not to mention potty-mouthed...”

“You just don’t understand.”

Tang Thirty-Six stilled his steps, turning around to stare towards the Capital with a melancholic face. “Like on the day Tian Hai Sheng Xue came charging at the doors of our school. Standing in the rain with a sword in my hand; naturally I would be cool, but I was feigning the stoic atmosphere. Pretending to be on the verge all the time is actually tiring.”

Chen Chang Sheng let out a sound of understanding and said, “So you were just faking it all this time?”

Tang Thirty-Six gave out a curt laugh, “Stupid, apart from that wolf-child of the North, who would be so naturally cold and aloof?”

“Why did you decide to stop faking it?”

“Why would I need to fake it in front of you all?”

“Well... at least... at least cut down on the vulgarity, it’s not right.”

“Like as if the bunch of you can understand how I feel? From the earliest moments I can remember, I’ve had to pretend to be stoic and proud, like a being that isn’t swayed by worldly matters. After restraining myself for so many years; like a dam that has been held back until bursting, I’ll be damned if I don’t let it go for at least a few days.”

“What you mean to say is, holding it in until you’ve basically scarred yourself will make you a delinquent?”

“That’s right, the longer you hold it in for, the greater the subsequent outburst. Like that little wife of yours; a saint-like lady, to the point where even demons from Old Snow City would gladly kneel before her; I’m sure, even she would have moments where she would want to...”

Tang Thirty-Six hesitated for a moment while watching Chen Chang Sheng, before continuing, “... cuss people’s mothers on

impulse.”

Chen Chang Sheng was surprised for a moment, before finally realising he was referring to Xu You Rong, prompting him to remain silent.

“But the gazes of those girls who were staring at you earlier all changed.” Xuan Yuan Po said in tone of pity.

Tang Thirty-Six answered: “I don’t like being stared at by these girls, at Wen Shui it was like this, at Heavenly Academy it was like this; but now I’m at Orthodox Academy. I’m not the Mausoleum of Books, what’s there to see?”

Xuan Yuan Po remembered the pretty figures of the human girls from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green and wistfully said: “If only they could look at me like that instead”

“My brother, as old-looking as you naturally are, aren’t you only 13 years of age? Yet you’re already thinking about sowing your seeds?”

“Chen Chang Sheng is only older than me by a year, yet isn’t he already going to get married? Not to mention, for us, having children at 13 is normal.”

“That raises the question, I’m curious, how many children can your kind bear at once?”

A cough resonated from Jin Yu Lu.

This prompted an immediate change in topic by Tang Thirty-Six:
“What’s so nice about being stared at by people?”

“Having it isn’t a bad thing.”

“What if you get stare-death?”

“What’s stare-death?”

“Stares that stare you to death.”

“Uhh... wouldn’t that only be possible from the Saint Realm?”

“You’re impossible to converse with.”

“Just try.”

“In times past, the younger brother of Zhou Du Fu, named Zhou Yu Ren, was famed as to being the most handsome man on the continent, on his first visit to the Capital, he received the welcoming of tens of thousands of women; their stares were as hot as a flame, akin to a wish to swallow him whole. Zhou Yu Ren, who was originally already weak of constitution, couldn’t withstand this shock and verged on the point of death, and hence, came the phrase: stare-death.”

“Well, my yao body is stronger than that of humans, so I can’t see a problem.”

“There really is no point in conversing with you.”

“Thirty-Six, thinking on it now, you’re not that good looking, so aren’t you just thinking too much?”

Honest people speak honest words; the most effective, the most potent words.

Orthodox Academy had two of these people in the form of Chen Chang Sheng and Xuan Yuan Po.

Tang Thirty-Six felt hurt.

A thousand steps may be arduous, yet it was no match for the pacing of Chen Chang Sheng alongside playful banter. After a short while, the group arrived before the Hall of Clear Virtue.

With Jin Yu Lu leading, they verified their identity before continuing to enter the Hall of Clear Virtue.

The Hall of Clear Virtue, matching its name, had a calm breeze within its walls, furnishings were sparse and the floors were spotless; an extremely wide and modest-looking space. What confused Chen Chang Sheng however, was that he couldn’t see any signs of people residing in this area; where was Luo Luo’s living quarters?

Jin Yu Lu didn't say anything, but took the three youths and followed the clergyman that lead the way onwards towards a deeper section of the building. The Hall of Clear Virtue's flooring was paved with green-coloured slabs of around 2 [chi \(Chinese foot\)](#) in length, upon stepping on each, they would mysteriously radiate a faint brilliance. Xuan Yuan Po lowered his gaze towards his steps, looking at the phenomenon with much amusement and curiosity.

Note that a chi (measure of length) can commonly be translated as a "Chinese foot" and is officially $\frac{1}{3}$ of a metre in length, which is really close to being the same length as a foot (just over 13 inches).

Chen Chang Sheng also focused his attention on this special property of the green-coloured slabs, looking farther away, other green slabs did not exhibit the same radiance as those currently under their feet and were also differing in hue. Thinking upon the vast area covered by the hall, these green slabs must have numbered in the tens of thousands, could they have been arranged to form some sort of pattern?

Alas, just like how it isn't possible to make out the image of a mountain while being situated on the mountain; by standing amidst the green slabs, he couldn't make out its pattern and could only let go of this thought.

If one were to observe from the top of the hall however, they would be able to clearly see that the slabs of differing hue collectively formed the image of a lone, green tree leaf, and Chen Chang Sheng's group were currently walking along a path delineated as one of the veins of this leaf.

The leading clergyman was a person of few words, who only occasionally spoke to Jin Yu Lu briefly while ignoring the three youths.

With each step they took, green slabs would continue radiating in turn, illuminating this particular path on the leaf, akin to some sort of energy permeating through.

Finally, the tree leaf path became fully illuminated and the group had arrived, under the leading of the clergyman, to the farthest region of the hall.

What awaited ahead was pitch blackness.

The darkness only endured for a short while, giving Chen Chang Sheng the impression of it being only a blink of an eye. From the closing of the eye, to the next moment of opening, akin to the passing of an entire night, experienced by everyone present; a moment of darkness, then light, and thus entrance to a new world, this experience wasn't shared by everyone present.

Upon this scene, his mouth lightly widened in shock, unable to say anything in reaction.

Xuan Yuan Po, who was standing beside him had an even more exaggerated expression.

A sky dyed in porcelain blue, with countless clouds floating by,

each perfectly shaped, akin to the propitious clouds described in The Books. Amongst the clouds were hundreds of saintly cranes soaring across, with their calls filling the air, a scene that calmed the very soul.

Before them stood a towering palace.

Situated farther away, there were also other palaces, all constructed of the same design.

This was a perfect world, no matter the propitious clouds, the saintly cranes, the palaces, the jade pools or even the clean and refreshing air, all painted a picture of perfection. An ethereal kind of perfection that felt far-removed from reality, yet here they were, experiencing the reality for themselves.

“Don’t embarrass our school, just continue forwards.”

Tang Thirty-Six quietly said to the other two from the side before moving forwards like as if he didn’t know them.

By the time Chen Chang Sheng regained his senses, he could already see that Jin Yu Lu and the leading clergyman had reached the towering palace. Quickly patting Xuan Yuan Po in order to rouse him, they hurriedly followed onwards.

Upon reaching the location of Tang Thirty-Six, they asked: “This is?”

Tang Thirty-Six answered: “This is a miniature world, you should have heard of it before.”

Chen Chang Sheng was silent, being well versed in The Books, he knew of the miniature world, but after experiencing today and having come to the miniature world in person, he better appreciated the shallowness of knowledge from books.

According to legend, upon the descent of the Heavenly Tomes, a divine fire also followed; causing fractures in the very space itself, leaving behind countless shards of space, these shards of space were scattered across the entire continent. While some of these shards were very unstable, and dissipated soon after appearing, some were conversely stable and could remain for a long period of time.

Through the long passage of time, after countless years had passed, the number of shards gradually diminished, leaving behind only the most stable of these shards. Leading to the origin of the phrase: “Time, is the only standard with which to judge the world.”

Stable shards were discovered by humanity, and through the fearsome use of great abilities by cultivators to activate them, using extremely high levelled and wondrous tools as the entrance, they managed to open a pathway between the shards and reality. These shards of space usually contained an exceedingly large space within, offering many uses, this was the miniature world.

The Wen Shui Tang family had a miniature world of their own, though it wasn't very large, it was enough to place the Tang clan a

level above the other so-called wealthy families. The reason for Tang Thirty-Six's calm demeanour was due to having frequented his family's miniature world as a child, being taken by his grandfather to play in the space.

“So this is... a blossom a world...”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the scene of perfection, alongside towering edifices before him and felt a moment of emotion, then, for some unknown reason, looked at the small sword strapped around his waist.

Chapter 109 – Reunion

“Within a flower is a world, within a leaf is also a world; this is a saying based upon the outer appearance, but it’s not really correct. Are we really situated within a flower or a leaf? These so called flowers and leaves are just tools created by our forebears through the use of great abilities, they are doors into a fragment of space.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “The larger the shard of space is, the more stable, yet it also becomes harder to activate. You would need a truly grand ability in order to successfully turn it into a tool; it is only once this is done, then can we truly say it is a miniature world with a master.”

Chen Chang Sheng agreed with this view, the reasoning was understandable. Xuan Yuan Po grew up in a remote tribe and didn’t have any knowledge or experience on this subject, upon listening to this exchange, he shook his head and said: “This place is so big? Why is it called a miniature world?”

Tang Thirty-Six didn’t reply, in truth, he was also in awe of everything before him, but loath to express any outward signs of his awe. The miniature world owned by the Wen Shui family paled in comparison to this flawless world.

Chen Chang Sheng answered: “This miniature world is so vast, I wonder who the owner is?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him like as if he just saw an idiot and replied: “The Pope of course.”

Chen Chang Sheng came to his senses, scouring the entire continent, those with the ability to control such a miniature world could be counted upon the digits of one hand. With the location of this place being Li Palace, who else could it be?

“The entry to a miniature world is controlled by its owner’s will.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the saintly cranes flying across the sky and solemnly said: “Her Highness will be safe here.”

If the demon race wished to killed Luo Luo now, they would first have to remove His Holiness, The Pope, before they could enter this palace.

This was an impossible scenario, thus the safety of Luo Luo was all but guaranteed.

Chen Chang Sheng understood this, staying here was the safest option for Luo Luo, but upon thinking that her ability to leave this world was dependent upon the Pope’s will, he couldn’t help thinking that this was not too different from being confined.

Yet, remembering that just months ago, there was an assassination attempt at Orthodox Academy, he couldn’t say anything.

Upon entering the towering building, they started climbing the

stairs within, to an ever greater elevation. Their line of sight grew with their ascent, but even at the 20th floor, they couldn't see any end to this miniature world; Chen Chang Sheng was thoroughly impressed, thinking to himself that His Holiness lived up to being one of the pinnacle experts on the continent.

On the edge of their sight, there were still tens of palaces, fading in and out of their view.

Chen Chang Sheng found this puzzling and moved to Jin Yu Lu's location, asking his question in a low tone before being informed that the Orthodoxy had a large number of clergymen, whom, alongside a lot of other capable cultivators, were given the right to cultivate in the Pope's Green Leaf (Qing Ye) World, after having achieved some great merit.

Chen Chang Sheng voiced his concern: "If the demon race wished to harm Her Highness, they wouldn't be able to force their way into this world... but what if the clergymen and cultivators that have been residing here all this time were to have a traitor in their midst? How can this be guarded against?"

"An agent of the demon race that can obscure themselves before the perception (ability) of the Pope? Even Black Robe, that old crook, wouldn't dare to try this."

The leading clergyman, upon hearing the words of Chen Chang Sheng, solemnly answered.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't say anything else.

The group finally began arriving to the top floor, the expansive and flat apex had a small courtyard; surrounding the walls of the compound, planted within and without, were a number of bamboo, presenting the viewer with a delightful array of greenery.

Knowing that Luo Luo was residing at this place, Chen Chang Sheng felt more at ease.

Jin Yu Lu took the three youths to the entrance of the lodging before stopping, he turned around to look at Chen Chang Sheng, with a small smile on his lips, before saying: “The words of that clergyman couldn’t have allayed your fears, but all I can tell you is that I can’t take a step into this small residence, does that help to alleviate your worry?”

Chen Chang Sheng knew that miniature worlds had a so-called limit, especially for smaller shards of space. If someone with a True Essence capacity over a certain level was to enter the space within, then the shard of space would immediately begin to fracture; the space within, alongside the cause, would evaporate into nothingness.

But this residence was a part of His Holiness’ Green Leaf World.

Why wouldn’t Jin Yu Lu be able to step inside?

Not to mention, such a scenario would simplify any assassination attempt by the demon race; sending a single agent on a suicide mission would be enough.

Jin Yu Lu replied: “Some worlds have too tall an entrance; some worlds have too low a ceiling; some worlds have too narrow an entrance.”

Chen Chang Sheng understood, thinking of the saying: “Space has no constant.”

Some miniature worlds, upon the entry of too much True Essence, would immediately destruct, this was having too low a “ceiling”.

Some miniature worlds, couldn’t be entered unless you reached a certain level, this was having too tall an “entrance”.

Some miniature worlds, couldn’t be entered by those above a certain level, this was having too narrow an “entrance”.

Some miniature worlds, contained a multitude of “spaces” (rooms).

Space, was the hardest thing to grasp, the principles behind it were always complex and wondrous.

The Pope’s Green Leaf World, was clearly of the type that had a low ceiling, but due the vastness of this world, it could still accommodate an expert like Jin Yu Lu, but that was only because the previous locations they passed by were connecting spaces.

The lodging located at this apex, was a true “room” of this world; the “ceiling” of this residence was lower, thus, Jin Yu Lu couldn’t continue.

“Only those under the Ethereal Opening realm can enter.” Jin Yu Lu explained.

With this, Chen Chang Sheng finally relaxed, as the tutor of Luo Luo, he was confident of her ability to deal with anyone under the Ethereal Opening realm.

The three youths entered the courtyard, crossing two bamboo thickets, and, before the greeting of the receiving maid had even finished; Luo Luo entered their sights.

Luo Luo was by the window, a brush and paper in hand, writing something with a serious look on her face. Constantly crossing and relaxing her brows, or biting the tip of the brush, a rather cute scene.

Upon seeing the corner of the paper that was lifted through the wind Chen Chang Sheng knew that she was following his instructions and writing her cultivation diary, this was because the paper was originally given to her by him. Paper that was originally found in a desk located in the library back at Orthodox Academy, each sheet had the insignia of their school.

Such a scene brought warmth to his heart.

Luo Luo was in the middle of bringing the brush to her mouth, when she suddenly noticed something, upon turning around to look, the brush stopped at her lips.

“Ah.”

She let out a single sound, threw away the brush and charged towards Chen Chang Sheng, her white gown leaving behind after-images from the speed, with the space around her letting out sounds of after-shocks; a shocking momentum.

Tang Thirty-Six sharpened his attention, his face suddenly changed and immediately pushed Xuan Yuan Po aside before quickly dodging, only leaving Chen Chang Sheng in his original position.

In the blink of an eye, Luo Luo had charged from the window to Chen Chang Sheng's location, it was at this moment, that she suddenly thought of something: if she didn't slow down, her tutor was about to become the first victim in history to die under a hug; her little face immediately drained of colour.

She uttered another sound, but this was one made in the midst of exerting great effort.

The young lady stomped a foot upon the ground, creating a single explosive bang, before a web of cracks surfaced on the solid ground beneath her. A horrifying wave of energy spread out, seemingly causing the entire palace to shudder, with dust rising up all over.

A blanket of silence followed, with vague sounds of alarmed clergymen outside of the residence coming through.

Calm eventually returned.

The dust eventually settled, with the view returning to clarity, only the bamboo were slightly stained by the event.

Chen Chang Shen and Luo Luo stood across from each other.

She was wearing a rimless hat (imagine a beret), and had small braids; due to the previous speed, the braids had begun to unravel, her black hair resembled a mass of weeds, stuck under her hat, the overexertion of her True Essence caused her small face to flush up in red, a rather cute scene.

Time passed by.

“Greetings to Sir.”

She decorously performed a formal student greeting to her tutor by bowing down, without a single mistake possible in her movements.

She was the same little thing as her time at the school.

Chen Chang Sheng extended his hand and patted her head.

Luo Luo gave out a frivolous sound of joy before standing straight, rubbing her head against his palm.

Chen Chang Sheng extended his arm and rubbed away dirt that had gotten on her face.

Luo Luo laughed out in delight before casting herself into his arms, planting her small face into his chest and rubbing her face clean.

Xuan Yuan Po was used to seeing this scene, but was still unused to this scene, yet he knew he should remain silent.

Tang Thirty-Six however, had never seen this scene before and had a massive gape between his lips.

His admiration of Chen Chang Sheng was akin to a surging tide, akin to never-ending streams.

He also started to worry for Chen Chang Sheng; how was he going to handle this future?

From outside of the small residence, Official Li had an unpleasant look on her face. From the moment Luo Luo jumped into Chen Chang Sheng's arms, her hand, which was on the entrance door had started to shiver.

Jin Yu Lu only laughed, without uttering a single word.

Official Li turned towards the fencing, motioning for him to follow.

Jin Yu Lu glanced at the doorway, only seeing that fingerprints had been left behind, the print was very deep and clear-cut.

This was the Pope's Green Leaf World, the material of the palace was incredibly hard, for her to leave behind such strong imprints was proof enough that she was on the verge of exploding.

"It was with much difficulty that we finally managed to take away Her Highness, so why did you have to bring that person here?"

Official Li look at him with worry and continued: "This really, really, cannot continue."

Jin Yu Lu laughed, "It's fine, they're good children."

This was already the apex of the palace, the deepest location of the clouds.

In the farthestmost part of the residence, was Luo Luo bedroom, the door side had some saplings growing, but it wasn't possible to make out what plants they were, outside the window, clouds drifted by.

Luo Luo sat beside the window, looking at the sheet in front of her, the ink had dried, but it was evidently very fresh; it should have been written the night before; thinking of how much her tutor cared about her, she felt slightly giddy, neglecting to pay attention to the contents of the sheet before her.

“Concentrate.”

Chen Chang Sheng was the same as always, he was close to Luo Luo in age and still a youth, therefore he didn't have any attitude that would be more fitting for an elder, or paid any attention to the strict conduct of a teacher. But on the subject of cultivation, he was always fastidious, sometimes even severe.

Upon thinking more closely, this was the first time the two had met since the night after the Ivy League gathering.

He now knew that Luo Luo was the sole daughter of the White Emperor, but his attitude towards her was still the same as before.

Luo Luo was very happy with her tutor being like this, and with a single sound of acknowledgement, she began to seriously read the sheet before her.

After an indeterminate period of time, she finished reading the paper before her in its entirety and lifted her gaze towards Chen Chang Sheng, preparing to listen to his lecture.

“In the school library, I found a total of 400 plus books

concerning cultivators that had failed to break through to the Ethereal Opening realm, within that, 332 people died, while the rest either committed suicide after turning insane, or became fully paralysed, suffering a fate worse than death; the risk is exceptionally high. I don't have any real way of aiding you in this matter, so all I can do is to summarise precedents for you, we may not know how to successfully break into the next realm, but at the very least we can know what mistakes were committed by our forebears. According to my findings, failure can be broadly classified into 3 categories and 97 types..."

Chen Chang Sheng moved to her side before pointing at the words on the paper before her, earnestly explaining while doing so. Luo Luo earnestly listened, occasionally nodding her head.

With the faint rays of daylight shining in, white clouds calmly drifting by the window and greenery lightly swaying outside, it was akin to them once again being back at the school campus.

Chapter 110 – Teaching

After another long period of time, Chen Chang Sheng finished explaining the contents of the paper, and Luo Luo hurriedly carried over some cooled tea.

He took the teacup and drank from it, and then said: “Your situation is different from Tang Thirty-Six’s, because unlike for humans, it is rare for someone of the yao race to practise human cultivation methods and attempt to break into the next realm, therefore we have to be extra cautious. However, if you really could mould your Core to resemble the Ethereal Palace, there should be a possibility of success.

Luo Luo nodded her head and replied: “Rest assured, Sir. Only after I am completely ready, and you have approved of it, will I attempt to break through this realm.”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at her seriously and said: “Actually, I’ve been thinking, you really do not need to take this risk.”

Since she was the yao race’s only Princess, she owned many things: the people by her side that served her were all legends on the same level of Jin Yu Lu. Because of this, Luo Luo really did not need to cultivate so diligently, and especially, it was not necessary for her to use human cultivation methods and risk her life.

“The cultivation method used in the White Emperor’s clan is only suitable for males: females have absolutely no opportunities to reach the highest level, and yet, my parents, their Royal

Majesties, have me as their only child.” As Luo Luo spoke, her voice became lower and lower, while she drooped her head, appearing rather dejected. Then, all of the sudden, she raised her head and resolutely said: “That is why I have to come up with other methods.”

Chen Chang Sheng was silent for a moment, and no longer tried to sway her. He took out a few prescriptions from his bosom and handed them over to her.

Seeing his serious expression, Luo Luo knew that these prescriptions were not ordinary, and she alertly looked all around, making sure that no maids had dared to come close. It was only then that she turned back around to receive the prescriptions. To her surprise, she saw that the surface of the table was covered with many medicinal herbs, fruits, and root-like objects.

The medicinal herbs had already been arranged neatly by type, with a name tagged upon each binding. The roots still had remnants of fresh soil, while some of the fruits even had dew remaining on their surface —she was a bit amazed, and didn’t know how Chen Chang Sheng had carried those things in; where were they previously put on his body?

Chen Chang Sheng did not provide an explanation. He told her the names of all of those medicinal herbs, fruits, and roots, and even gave simple explanations for each one’s medicinal effect. Then, he pointed at the prescriptions and said: “Li Palace should have medicine refining masters. If there is one that you trust, ask him to help you; things such as temperature control and other details have already been written down.”

Luo Luo asked: “What will these pills be used for?”

“Their main purpose is to foster a solid foundation. It is the same medicine I am currently giving Tang Thirty-Six to adjust his body. Only, it is inconvenient to come to the palace every day, and moreover, refined pills should be more effective, so I thought of this method, hoping that when you start to break through your current realm, it can be of use; it should at least be able to lower the risk.”

Chen Chang Sheng waited for her to put the prescription away, and then said: “After today, I will be using all of my effort to prepare for the Grand Examination, and might not come to see you frequently, so take care of yourself.”

Luo Luo wasn't sure why he cared so deeply about the Grand Examination, but during those several months she stayed at Orthodox Academy, she was made very clear of this point. Thinking about how her tutor, even at this time, did not forget her, and was treating her so attentively, she couldn't help but feel moved.

Then, she remembered what Jin Yu Lu had previously said, how Chen Chang Sheng had suffered ridicule and humiliation on the divine avenue, and her thin eyebrows stirred up——she had been moved just a moment ago, but she was now very angry. She lowered her voice and said: “Those people actually dared to treat Sir so rudely, they're far too impudent!”

As she said those words, she was like a small tiger, still cute, but also rather majestic.

Chen Changsheng extended out his hand and rubbed her head, laughing: “Now this is more fitting of the White Emperor’s daughter.”

Luo Luo clicked her tongue, and her majestic atmosphere immediately dissipated.

It was only after having dealt with all of the important matters that Chen Chang Sheng had time to be concerned about her current situation. He asked: “Are you satisfied living here?”

Hearing those words, Luo Luo gave out a pout, and replied in an aggrieved tone: “I’m bored to death; I miss the Hundred Herb Garden, I miss our school, and I miss Sir.”

By now, Chen Chang Sheng knew that the space inside this Green Leaf World, was officially called Little Li Palace, and was linked to the Pope through his divine sense (think spirit sense). If Luo Luo still wanted to act how she had acted in the past and sneak out, she definitely would not be able to do it. Although Little Li Palace was vast, it was not connected to the outside world.

“I’ll think of a plan.”

Chen Chang Sheng said those words very naturally, even though with his current status and strength, rationally speaking, he would

not be able to do anything. However, he had gotten used to treating Luo Luo's affairs as his own, and it didn't occur to him that this made him seem arrogant and ignorant of his own limits.

Fortunately, he and Luo Luo were currently the only ones in the room, and Luo Luo absolutely did not think this way. She said: "The Grand Examination is coming up soon, and Sir should rest and carefully prepare. You certainly should not get distracted because of me, since I know that you want to take first place."

Right now, she and Tang Thirty-Six's faith in Chen Chang Sheng had already started to approach blind faith, far greater than even Chen Chang Sheng's own faith in himself. Regarding this, Chen Chang Sheng was very moved and grateful, and every time he lost confidence in himself, she and Tang Thirty-Six would always use their words and attitude to help him revive his confidence.

"Just then I saw that you were biting your brush again?" Chen Chang Sheng thought of an issue, and stared at her as he talked.

Luo Luo got a little flustered. At Orthodox Academy, Chen Chang Sheng had told her several times that her brush wasn't clean, and that biting it could easily make her ill... she had with great difficulty corrected this bad habit, but after she arrived at Little Li Palace, there was no one to manage her, and she reverted back to her old habit again, biting her brush.

"This... This..."

She nervously tried to explain: "Teacher, recently, my teeth have

been growing in, so it's very itchy, and sometimes I can't endure it."

Up to this point, Chen Chang Sheng had thought that she was only eleven or twelve years old, but logically speaking, an eleven or twelve year old should have already finished growing in all of her permanent teeth. Hearing those words, he couldn't help but be a bit nervous, and after using fresh water and medicinal powder to wash his hands, he had Luo Luo open her small mouth: "Ah..."

Luo Luo obediently let out an "ah" sound, which she proceeded to drag out for a long time.

Chen Chang Sheng inserted his finger into her mouth and carefully examined her teeth. He discovered that she truly was growing in her permanent teeth, and that there wasn't any big problem.

"Teacher, my permanent teeth will keep on growing in until I'm sixteen years old. It's really annoying."

Because her mouth was open, Luo Luo's words were unclear, and the word Sir (Xian Sheng – Sensei) sounded like "Sheng Sheng", like she was calling out Chen Chang Sheng's nickname.

It was only at this moment that Chen Chang Sheng remembered: Luo Luo was the yao race's Princess, and in many areas, was different from humans.

He washed his hands, and then gave her another prescription, which had nothing to do with treating illness, but was a way to increase her appetite. He also told her how to make a chew stick.

“Only iron tree sticks will work.”

Luo Luo picked up that pen. On the tail end of it was many distinct bite marks: “This pen is made from iron tree, or else it would break from one bite.”

Chen Chang Sheng was reminded of the White Emperor’s bloodline; creating a chew stick that could hold up was not easy. He looked toward the flower pots outside of the door and asked: “Those are iron tree saplings, but they are different from the ones shown in books.”

Luo Luo replied: “Those are banyan tree sprouts, but I don’t know whether they will grow to maturity.”

At Orthodox Academy, there was a lake, and next to the lake there was a big banyan tree. She and Chen Chang Sheng often stood atop the banyan tree while watching the setting sun.

Chen Chang Sheng laughed: “They will definitely grow to maturity.”

The autumn light passed through many windows, and when it arrived at the very deepest part of the real Li Palace, it became even more light and refreshing, and yet it was only after it

reflected off of the top of the Crystal Throne that it once again began to glitter brilliantly. The clear and clean crystal was carved into the form of a lotus flower, and in the centre of the lotus flower there was a crown. The crown was divided into two colours, one black and one white, with no distinct dividing line between them, and yet, the two shades were not mixed into a grey. Rather, it was quite mystical, fused together in an incomprehensible way. It was extremely perfect; emitting a divine aura.

On the side of the lotus flower seat, there was a chair carved out of the trunk of a black flower tree, and on the chair sat an elderly man. The elderly man was wearing a loose hemp robe, and his grey hair tumbled over his shoulders, like a waterfall in winter that hadn't quite managed to completely solidify into ice.

That elderly man was currently reading a book.

Opposite to the elderly man was another elderly man.

The Education Board's Archbishop, Mei Li Sha, who was one of the few people from the same generation as the Pope, was naturally already very old. Every time the palace and Education Board's clergy saw the age spots on his face, they would always become unboundedly concerned, always worried that this venerable elder would one day silently re-join the stars in the sky.

Mei Li Sha himself was unable to see the wrinkles and old age spots on his face, because ever since he grew his first white hair, over two hundred years ago, he refused to look in the mirror ever again, no matter if it was his own chamber's luxurious copper mirror, or a mirror created from the coalescence of True Essence.

Watching oneself grow old was a torturous process, especially for this type of person, for whom growing old could stretch through a process as long as hundreds or close to a thousand years, making it even more difficult to bear.

Not seeing, is not equal to not knowing; even if you were to blind yourself, the starry sky will still exist, Mei Li Sha himself very clearly knew that he had grown old, because he was growing more and more fond of sleeping——different from those normal elderly people who got up very early every morning at the third hour, the older he got, the more he liked to sleep. He always felt that his body was adapting in advance to his eternal rest.

Within the current Orthodoxy, he was the one with the longest history; due to recent events involving Orthodox Academy, he was considered by many to be the leader of the tradition faction of the Orthodoxy, or at least the figurehead; using these events to challenge the authority of the Pope. The Archbishop had long resided at the Orthodoxy's Education Board and hadn't stepped foot into Li Palace for quite some time. He even neglected to participate in the regular Seminars of Radiance, adding to the credibility of the rumours surrounding him; who would have thought that he would appear in Li Palace today, let alone to be sleeping here.

“Pa”

A sound rang out lightly, but the inside of the palace hall was exceedingly quiet, so the sound was very clear.

Mei Li Sha opened his eyes, and for a period of time his eyes were

a bit muddy, before they gradually restored their clarity. He looked towards the book-reading hempen-robed elder opposite him, and while wobbling, stood up and walked over, humbly bending over his body and looking towards the plant in the flower pot next to the elderly man.

The flower pot was of a light grey colour, very ordinary; in the streets of the Capital, one could buy three of them for about a hundred coins. The plant planted in the flower pot was very strange; it had a healthy young stalk and several branches, but only had one leaf. That leaf was very green, and its vein network was very clear.

Previously, that clear “pa” sound had come from that green leaf, the very front end of the leaf seemed to be trembling—it wasn’t the green leaf that was trembling, but its vein network that was. The degree of the trembling was so slight that in the entire palace, perhaps only he and that hempen-robed elder were able to see it.

“That young Highness has become angry to this degree; you actually have the frame of mind to be reading that book?”

Mei Li Sha looked towards that hempen-robed elder, in a respectful, yet cosy manner.

That hempen-robed elder put away his book, lifted his head, and looked towards that flower pot. He had a very ordinary appearance; the most distinctive part was his extremely deep eye sockets. If one looked from the side, it looked very much like the entrance to an abyss of terror, but if one looked from the front, one would be able to see ocean-like tranquil azure eyes.

Chapter 111 – The Pope

The ocean within the elderly person's eyes was very calm, giving the impression of boundless compassion. This was however, still an ocean and it was hard to imagine what kind of tidal waves could be created if this elder was to be enraged; what kind of spectacle would be created from those giant waves; how awe-inspiring and mighty would such a scene be?

“You actually managed to fall asleep while we were talking, apart from reading this book, what else could I do?” The elder replied to Mei Li Sha with a smile on his face.

Mei Li Sha continued looking at the Green Leaf and shook his head, replying: “My intent in coming here should be clear to you, you should give those children some proper guidance on their path.”

“An individual's path has to be tread by themselves.”

The hempen-robed elder continued: “Ever since that child arrived at the Capital, his path has been stable, therefore there's nothing to worry about, though... I would prefer to see him mature even faster.”

Clearly, the elder was very interested in the child mentioned.

Upon hearing the word “mature”, Mei Li Sha was silent for a time, a seemingly invisible pressure slowly formed around the calm and peaceful Li Palace.

“Maturation requires rain to vitalise, and occasionally, pressure.”

The hempen-robed elder said: “The council of Divine Ordinance’s new Proclamation should be arriving soon.”

Mei Li Sha understand what he meant; rankings had pressure. The three proclamations of Liberation (Xiao Yao), Golden Distinction and Azure Clouds; countless experts and geniuses, countless people, all tried and trained at their hardest in order to make a place for themselves on these proclamations. Those who managed to get a place, upon seeing those listed ahead of them, would also be motivated to go further.

The council of Divine Ordinance existed on this continent, alongside its proclamations, purely as a source of pressure and motivation for humans and yao, only with this, could they stand against the strength of the demon race.

“That child has no possibility of placing on the proclamation, though, due to his grim past, and harsh fate, his views on fame and glory are probably even more subdued than ours.”

Upon hearing this, the hempen-robed elder sighed and said: “Then we can only wait and see if the Grand Examination can help him.”

Mei Li Sha contemplated for a while and came to agree with the hempen-robed elder’s view; due to the fates etched upon the stars above, below these stars, only life was worth respecting, living was

in itself a struggle, under such pressure, that child would naturally mature quickly.

“I’m leaving then.”

He stood up, bowed towards the hempen-robed elder to signal his farewell, then turned and headed out of Li Palace.

The hempen-robed elder did not respond, only raising his book and continuing to read.

Time slowly passed by.

The grey pot and its Green Leaf were calm, for there was no wind.

After an indeterminate period of time, the hempen-robed elder’s gaze left his book and switched to the sky outside of Li Palace, on his face was an expression of envy.

If the clergymen within Li Palace were to see this expression, they would definitely be severely shocked.

Upon this continent, there was something that existed which could draw envy from this elder?

The clear chimes of bells rolled in, transmitting from far away, these did not signal the start of classes for the schools like Li Palace

College or Temple Seminary, but were peals that signalled the beginning of the Radiant Congregation, that was held once every 10 days.

The elder rose up, removing his hempen-robe.

A black-robed clergyman suddenly appeared, sombrely taking out a divine robe for the elder to change into.

The elder headed towards the stairs, and upon passing the Lotus Flower Pedestal that was carved from crystal, he reached out and picked up the crown, a very casual motion, akin to picking up some common tile.

The black-robed clergyman that was following behind this elder, was well-known for being cold and stoic, the expression on his face having never changed in the past tens of years. But every time he saw the current scene before him, the edge of his eyes would uncontrollably twitch, his concern being: what would they do if the Yin Yang Crown was to be damaged here?

At the top of the stone steps was a mural, heavy in ink, yet without form, an extremely glorious image.

The elder stood before the wall mural, placing the crown atop his head.

The mural covered wall slowly separated and a rush of light, akin to never-ending waves, spilled in from the opening.

The waves of light enveloped the elder's crown and divine robe, the dancing rays were like a celebration, obeisance.

This side of the wall, lead to an incredibly tall and expansive temple.

This was the heart of Li Palace; the heart of the Orthodoxy; the heart of the continent's beliefs, The Radiant Hall.

Both sides of the hall had dozens of gigantic statues, some depicted legends from this continent, some depicted virtuous forebears, some depicted saints, some depicted the twelve knights of the church.

Within the waves of light, countless clergymen gathered in worship.

The clergymen had the back of their hands pressed upon their foreheads, a scene of devotion.

The object of their worship, the elder.

The fourth Pope of the Orthodoxy.

By the time Chen Chang Sheng and the others left Little Li Palace, it was already past midday, he looked towards the slightly angled position of the Sun, wondering what time it was, upon

glancing back towards the Hall of Clear Virtue, that was as vacant as ever and seeing the green slabs; he thought of how they were just previously in another space, becoming slightly bewildered.

Li Palace in mid-autumn wasn't just a dazzling scene, the warming air of the afternoon, caused the green pagoda trees to take on a life of their own; the leaves sparkling with green radiance and if one's gaze were to lower, they would be presented with an array of greenery, giving a sense of being back in the midst of spring.

The group followed the never-ending steps downwards and after an endless distance, they could gradually see the figures of people appearing from both sides of the divine avenue, some of these figures even started directly stepping onto the avenue, preparing to block their advance.

“I told them if they had the guts then they should stay, so what are we going to do now?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the cold expression of a Li Palace clergyman, with a slightly vexed expression.

The Li Palace clergyman was the same one that previously received them at the Hall of Clear Virtue and lead them to Little Li Palace, it seems he was intent on escorting them out of Li Palace. Tang Thirty-Six knew this must have been Luo Luo's request, in order to avoid their group getting into anymore squabbles with the students.

He wasn't overly pleased with Luo Luo's arrangement, as it made him out to be a coward. Jin Yu Lu had no opinion on this matter, he didn't interpret it as to being a criticism on his handling of matters. Chen Chang Sheng was fine with this arrangement, as he was the one that suggested it to Luo Luo.

Upon this moment, the chiming sound of bells resonated in, it was unclear as to whether if it was from one of the palace buildings or one of the school campuses.

“Don't tell me they can use the bells to gather people for something like this? This is Li Palace, not some military base.” Tang Thirty-Six thought either Li Palace College or Temple Seminary were using their bells to gather people, upon seeing the current spectacle, no matter how fearless he was, he couldn't stop his expression changing.

Upon this moment, from the edge of the skies, a flock of birds suddenly scattered, akin to a gathering of people, parting to form a path. From the Eastern side, a layer of clouds suddenly formed a tunnel and a black shadow shot out across the sky at great speeds, before passing through the path created by the flock of birds, heading towards Li Palace.

Xuan Yuan Po was a youth from the yao race that grew up in the wilderness and was acquainted with all types of birds, he also had eyesight that was multiple times better than that of a human's; he shielded his eyes from the light and looked forwards, upon identifying the black shadow, he exclaimed: “It's a Red Goose (Hongyan).”

In comparison to divine beasts such as the Unicorn or Wan Li Deer (Ten-Thousand Mile Deer), Red Geese were not particularly special, but they had a special trait amongst birds and that was speed. It was one of the fastest types of bird that were currently known to the continent and ranked just under the Crimson Eagle, that was currently used by the military for transmitting messages, of course, these rankings did not include the White Crane.

Upon Xuan Yuan Po finishing his words, the black shadow had already arrived at the skies above Li Palace. Clergymen that had reached a high level and other individuals who were close to Tang Thirty-Six in ability, could make out the image of a long, red tail, it was indeed a Red Goose.

The Red Goose left behind a trail of after-images, before disappearing into the deeper recesses of the palace complex, to some place unknown.

“What’s happened?”

Tang Thirty-Six thought to himself, since it was a Red Goose, it couldn’t be a message from the North regarding movements of the demon race, it was also unlikely to be some sort of bad news, since the previous bell chimes were so steady and consistent. But what could it be, to require the dispatching of a Red Goose? Especially at this time, with the Radiant Congregation ongoing, didn’t they fear disrupting the congregation?

Further thinking on the subject didn’t lead to an answer, therefore Chen Chang Sheng’s group, under the leading of the Li Palace clergyman, continued advancing forwards, reaching the

bottom of the stairs after a short while. All they could see from this position was that the divine avenue had a multitude of people, who knows just how many people had arrived due to Tang Thirty-Six's previous words.

On the left side of the divine avenue, the doors to the guesthouse were tightly shut, Gou Han Shi had not made an appearance, the other three Laws from the Divine State were also absent. Disciples from Holy Maiden Peak and the other Southern Sects also neglected to make an appearance.

Chen Chang Sheng gazed past the Cedrus Trees, resting his gaze upon the guesthouse and staying quiet.

Due to his marriage vow with Xu You Rong, upon arriving at the Capital, starting from the Divine General's mansion, he had endured derision, scorn, ridicule and sometimes even humiliation, this naturally led him to have a bad impression of Qiu Shan Jun and his Sect.

During the Ivy League gathering, he finally met the other side.

The impression was different from his expectation, after two meetings, he found that they were not repulsive; be it Gou Han Shi, Guan Fei Bai or Qi Jian, be it their atmosphere, be it their admirable pride, be it their inspiring determination, all of it was endearing to him. He could also see that Gou Han Shi and the other disciples of Li Shan genuinely respected Qiu Shan Jun from the bottom of their hearts, therefore, how could Qiu Shan Jun be a fraudulent figure?

The autumn wind swept across his face; awakening him.

His mockingly laughed at himself, he had thought too much. Qiu Shan Jun was an individual praised by the entire continent for his talent, idolised for his virtue; therefore, there already wasn't any basis for assuming him to be a bad person, it was only due to their opposing positions that he had come up with such thoughts.

Chapter 112 – The Proclamation Has New Entrants (1)

Reaching the end of the steps and arriving at the divine avenue; apart from the guesthouse that was hosting the envoys from the South, the other school campuses were engulfed with the sounds of chatter. The woods on both sides of the avenue were teeming with the figures of people, with many others choosing to directly stand on the divine avenue.

There were also teachers from Li Palace College, Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green and Temple Seminary present; even some clergy members from the main palace had come to join the crowds as onlookers. The reason for this bustle, was naturally, due to the words of Tang Thirty-Six from this morning.

The clergyman that was leading Chen Chang Sheng's group was not of a low position within Li Palace, upon seeing this chaotic scene, he frowned his eyebrows and gave out a few quiet words of admonishment, which prompted the teachers to start trying to maintain some semblance of order; the teachers drove off students who had wanted to block the advance of Chen Chang Sheng's group and had them stand by the side of the avenue.

As Chen Chang Sheng and the other two youths walked along the divine avenue, hundreds or more gazes from the students amongst the woods on both sides of the avenue fell upon them, this scene was very similar to the one they had experienced in the morning; but this time, even more gazes were filled with scorn and disdain. A student from one of the schools suddenly cried out: "Tang Tang, if you've got the guts then don't run away!"

This was obviously directed to the words of Tang Thirty-Six from this morning and drew rounds of loud laughter from the crowds. Given Tang Thirty-Six's character, he was loath to continue moving, but upon a cold stare from the leading clergyman, he decided it was best not to draw any further trouble for their school and only angrily said: "I really hate being called Tang Tang."

Seeing Tang Thirty-Six having to endure their taunts, the students felt elated. They knew that the cold-looking clergyman was strict and thus no one dared to intrude upon the divine avenue, but they used the opportunity to continue hurling verbal abuse towards Orthodox Academy.

"Apart from having the support of Her Highness, what else can you do by yourself?"

"If it wasn't for Her Highness' arrangement, would you have even dared to go down those steps?"

"Not necessarily, he can still take out his marriage vow to use as a shield."

"That's right, the fiancé of Xu You Rong, who would dare to offend him?" said another student while clicking their tongue.

Continuous insults flew out from both sides of the divine avenue, filled with contempt and derision; asking who would dare to offend; until it finally turned to jeers that called him a sponger.

Tang Thirty-Six's expression became increasingly ugly, while Chen Chang Sheng lightly dipped his head and continued forwards, with both hands in his sleeves, akin to not being able to hear anything and showing no signs of being affected. This was the same as that rainy autumn day, when Orthodox Academy was besieged; he knew that the cause of this hostility wasn't due to the conflict from this morning, or due the young girl from Holy Maiden Peak, the cause was solely due to her.

The girl called Xu You Rong.

Yet the blame couldn't be laid upon her, it wasn't her fault.

Therefore, all he could do was to endure.

Suddenly, the jeers ebbed away like a fading tide, Chen Chang Sheng lifted his head and saw that a serene, quiet and gentle looking youth was standing upon the divine avenue; under the scolding of clergy and orders from teachers, the divine avenue was devoid of other people, yet upon this wide and empty path, this student had appeared.

Su Mo Yu, from Li Palace College.

Su Mo Yu ceremonially greeted the clergyman, before turning to gesture a greeting (揖手) to Chen Chang Sheng

“Their words have been rude, I apologise on behalf of Li Palace College.”

“No need.” replied Chen Chang Sheng.

Su Mo Yu didn't seem to have any intention of leaving the divine avenue and continued to stand on the path.

Tang Thirty-Six's eyebrow twitched and he said: “What is the meaning of this?”

Su Mo Yu shook his head and once again, ceremoniously bowed towards the clergyman, before saying: “With Priest Huo here, us students wouldn't dare to be insolent.”

The clergyman surnamed Huo didn't say anything, only having a mildly pleasant expression on his face.

“You don't want to fight, yet you continue blocking the way, what kind of intention do you have?” asked Tang Thirty-Six, with his eyes narrowing.

Su Mo Yu ignored him, looking towards Chen Chang Sheng and saying: “I have some words for you.”

“Please speak.” Chen Chang Sheng replied.

“Have you thought upon the reason why everyone is being so rude towards you?” asked Su Mo Yu.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't reply; the answer was already evident.

“Everyone's words are indeed unseemly, tinged with envy and lacking in grace, but... that does not mean they are without logic. That which you are in possession of, no matter how it is looked at, does not seem to be something you should be in possession of.”

Su Mo Yu quietly looked at him and continued: “This is because, you are not strong enough.”

Upon the utterance of those words, Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po had a change in expression, even the teachers of Li Palace College and Temple Seminary that were observing from the sides of the avenue had expressions of disapproval upon their faces.

“Whilst it is correct that on the night of the Ivy League gathering, your exchanges with Gou Han Shi on The Way seemed to be a contributing factor towards Orthodox Academy's victory over Li Shan Sword Sect... I do not believe this to be the case, all I can believe is that you are lucky enough to be blessed with many strong comrades. Her Highness has the gifted bloodline of the White Emperor and is a genius herself; your acquaintance with her can only be explained as luck. Along the same lines, Tang Tang is a young genius that is ranked on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, if it wasn't for his arrogance and over-reliance on talent leading to his splitting from Heavenly Academy, why else would he enter Orthodox Academy?”

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent.

“What is strength? Being strong, and also being able to help your companions become strong, that is true strength. For the coming Grand Examination, I do not assume to be able to place upon the head rankings, but I do hope for Li Palace College to have a greater number of people being ranked, than those from Heavenly Academy or Star Seizer Academy; becoming the leading school of the Six Ivy League schools.”

He continued.

“At the very least, I wouldn’t become a burden for Li Palace College, but you? At the Grand Examination, would you be able to rely upon luck or niceties like you did at the Ivy League gathering? What use is there to being well-read? What use is there to having knowledge that doesn’t lose to Gou Han Shi? If Gou Han Shi hadn’t already successfully cleared his Ethereal Palace, how could he rank second amongst the Seven Laws of the Divine State and even garner respect from Qiu Shan Jun?”

Su Mo Yu looked at him with a sober expression and said: “A person that only reads books, but doesn’t know how to apply the knowledge can be found in abundance in provincial schoolhouses, you might think that you can help your companions, but you are wrong, they are the ones helping you, without them, you are nothing more than a hopeless scholar; you will only be a liability for Orthodox Academy.”

Tang Thirty-Six derisively asked: “It seems like you’re even more concerned with our school’s performance than we are.”

“Of course.”

Su Mo Yu lightly inclined his head, not hiding his expression, “I am a very traditional person, like many of the other traditionalists of Li Palace and the various schools, we yearn towards the illustrious past of Orthodox Academy, the memory remains poignant. We wish to see the revival of Orthodox Academy and that is why I have said these words today, in order to spur you towards working harder; I hope that by the time of the Grand Examination, you would have completed your Purification, though you would still be a burden, it would at least be less unseemly.”

Upon finishing those words, he stepped off the divine avenue.

Chen Chang Sheng had rarely come across such an earnest, serious and stiff person, leaving him feeling forlorn and dejected, upon being reminded of himself, he started feeling sorry for Tang Thirty-Six and the others.

Tang Thirty-Six didn't consider Su Mo Yu and Chen Chang Sheng to be the same type of person; though both could be considered stiff, opinionated and stubborn, Chen Chang Sheng would rarely force his views upon others.

He knew Chen Chang Sheng was feeling dejected and looking at Su Mo Yu only made him feel even more unpleasant, thinking to himself: “What makes you think you can stand upon a pedestal and dictate to us the future of our school?”

He derisively laughed and said: “Was there any meaning to the nonsense you just said?”

Su Mo Yu looked at him with a prideful face and said: “When you rank before me on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, you can come and tell me that my words today are wrong.”

Tang Thirty-Six tidied his green gown and loftily said: “Then let’s battle.”

Su Mo Yu replied with a stiff attitude: “I will not fight you.”

Tang Thirty-Six was surprised, asking: “If you won’t fight me, how am I supposed to surpass you?”

Su Mo Yu replied: “I promised the principal that I will preserve my best state for the Grand Examination, therefore I will not raise my hand.”

Tang Thirty-Six was incensed, saying: “How shameless can you get?”

Upon hearing these words, students of Li Palace College started rebuking him; Su Mo Yu remained calm, as if nothing could sway him and replied: “We will meet at the Grand Examination, there’s no need for you to rush.”

Tang Thirty-Six angrily said: “So you’re saying I can’t do anything until the proclamation is re-issued?”

Su Mo Yu calmly replied: “You can say that.”

Tang Thirty-Six was infuriated to the point of insanity, deciding to ignore the presence of the clergyman surnamed Huo, ignoring the teachers that were standing on both sides of the divine avenue; he placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword and prepared to strike Su Mo Yu.

Chen Chang Sheng extended his hand and placed it atop of Tang Thirty-Six's, shaking his head.

He could tell that Su Mo Yu, the young genius of Li Palace College, was not someone who delighted in humiliating his opponents, he merely had an awkward personality that was too conservative and methodical, a traditionalist. Someone that respected authority and subsequently placed a lot of importance on things such as the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and promises that are made. The situation did not allow for Tang Thirty-Six to raise his hand, ignoring the elders of Li Palace that were currently standing on both sides of the divine avenue, even if Tang Thirty-Six was to raise his blade against him, judging by Su Mo Yu's character, he might just continue standing in position, allowing Tang to attack him as he pleased.

Furthermore, there was indeed a problem, even if Tang Thirty-Six was to carve Su Mo Yu into the resemblance of a flower, or defend him with a flower of words, it still wouldn't change the problem identified by Su Mo Yu.

Not being able to cultivate was a sore spot, it was also the reason for his words lacking weight, the reason why others would talk

down to him whilst calling him a sponger, the only thing he could do right now, was to think of some method that could allow him to successfully Purify, only this could change the opinions, the prejudice the world had on him, only then could he prove himself at the Grand Examination.

Of course, he had a more important reason for participating in the Grand Examination, but that still required a solution to his Purification, Su Mo Yu only managed to make his problem all the more starkly apparent.

Someone else was also displeased with events. Xuan Yuan Po looked at Su Mo Yu, gritted his teeth and said: “You’re telling us what it means to be strong? With that scrawny body of yours?”

“You? Wait till you’re ranked upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, then you can talk to me.”

Su Mo Yu gave him a single glance, before turning around and heading towards Li Palace College, the crowds erupted in laughter.

Compared with the trunk-like body of the yao youth, Su Mo Yu had only the typical frame of a young human, giving the impression of an extremely frail body, his words, nonetheless, had a strong effect.

Strength, was not related to the shape or build of the body.

A genius that ranked 33rd on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; a

yao youth that had only just recently left the Red River and came to the human Capital to start learning how to cultivate; between these two, what comparison could there be made?

Xuan Yuan Po considered for a while, but no matter how much he thought, he couldn't think of a rebuttal.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at him and gave a slightly apologetic smile.

Upon this moment, Xuan Yuan Po heard someone cry out his name.

The voice was really faint, from very far away, but he heard it clearly; it was indeed someone crying out his name.

He turned around to face the inner part of Li Palace, slightly baffled and said: "Who's calling me?"

The yao race's hearing ability was better than that of an average human's, even though he could hear the voice, the human students that were around the divine avenue couldn't hear anything, and thought he was trying to change the subject in avoidance of the earlier embarrassment, prompting bouts of laughter.

But within a moment, the sound finally travelled from some deep part of Li Palace and reached their location.

That voice was very clear and distinct.

There wasn't anyone "crying" out Xuan Yuan Po's name.

This was someone "proclaiming" Xuan Yuan Po's name.

"Xuan Yuan Po, the Capital's Orthodox Academy, Azure Cloud ranking One-hundred and Forty Eight."

The autumn wind swept by the woods, with golden leaves shimmering; silence surrounded the divine avenue.

Xuan Yuan Po dropped his jaw, not understanding what was happening.

Countless eyes rested upon him.

Within the autumn trees, the students were too shocked for words.

The Proclamation of Azure Clouds had begun a new proclamation?

How could this be?

How did this moron manage to place upon the proclamation?

Chapter 113 – The Proclamation Has New Entrants (2)

The voice was very clear and distinct, coming from a deeper part of Li Palace; judging from the direction, it probably came from the Hall of Oration, making use of a sound projecting array.

Everyone present was certain that they didn't hear wrongly, and thus both sides of the divine avenue became silent. After a while, private chatter started and eventually, a thunderclap-like realisation brought people back to their senses before they started to understand what was going on; the previous Red Goose that came from afar was actually bearing a new proclamation.

“The Azure Clouds has a new proclamation!” the youths excitedly exclaimed.

Yet, it was still late autumn, why would the Proclamation of Azure Clouds have a change?

Countless years ago, the demon race invaded South, in order to compel the younger generation of talent to cultivate harder and acclimatise themselves to competition, starting with the Orthodoxy, various powers and organisations started creating rankings and eventually also started including cultivators from the yao race. With the Council of Divine Ordinance being in charge of proclaiming the rankings, no one questioned its impartiality as it was personally validated by Elder Tian Ji (Divine Ordinance).

As the leading luminary of the Eight Storms, Elder Tian Ji had

impeccable intellect and an abundance of knowledge, alongside a highly regarded reputation.

Amongst all the rankings issued by the Council of Divine Ordinance, the Liberation, Golden Distinction and Azure Cloud proclamations were the most famous, reverently referred to by the masses as the Three Rankings between Heaven, Earth and Humanity.

In order to maintain the original intention of the rankings and prevent fighters within humanity from killing each other over fame and glory, which would have weakened humanity's fighting force against the demon race, the Proclamation of Liberation was restricted to select circles through word of mouth, while the Proclamation of Golden Distinction was only posted; the Proclamation of Azure Clouds alone, in order to encourage competition amongst young geniuses, was proclaimed across the entire world, being displayed prominently on stone walls at the gates of the Ivy League schools and Longevity Sect.

The schedule for a new Proclamation of the Azure Clouds was not set, but for countless years, it was usually updated after the yearly Grand Examination, and once every 3-5 years after the Grand Meeting of Zhu Shi; this meant the proclamation was effectively updated once a year.

Especially within the last 20 years, the Proclamation of Azure Clouds had only been updated early twice.

For both times, it was under special circumstances; two geniuses had suddenly appeared, their emergence was too eye-catching,

without promptly changing the proclamation, its accuracy would have been negatively affected and could have also impacted the standing of Elder Tian Ji, and caused the young geniuses who were already ranked upon the proclamation to question the legitimacy of their own standing.

The former of the two early updates was due to Qiu Shan Jun, while the latter was due to Xu You Rong... this year's Grand Examination had already resulted in a change to the Proclamation and there wasn't a Grand Meeting of Zhu Shi this year, what could have elicited an update in late autumn? Could it be an emergence of someone comparable to Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong?

The excited chatter surrounding the divine avenue died down, everyone felt a discomfort in their hearts: what had happened recently? The Ivy League gathering? No, the gathering was held every year, and was only a trial performance for the Grand Examination, it had never been able to affect the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; some eyes began gathering on Xuan Yuan Po, with ever increasing uncertainty and confusion.

Xuan Yuan Po was shocked himself, he was a simple yao youth that had grown up in a remote mountain tribe, but no matter how ignorant he might be, he knew about the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, this proclamation represented the desires and dreams of many young geniuses and was also a target he had striven towards himself; what he didn't understand was his inclusion upon its rankings.

His ranking was at 148, which, judging by past cases, should be the last ranking on the list and couldn't have been considered

overly special, what had to be kept in consideration however, was that apart from the demon race, only human and yao youths 20 years of age and under were eligible to be ranked on the Azure Clouds. Placing upon the proclamation is incredibly difficult, a saying amongst the schools of the Capital was that placing upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was as hard as stepping onto the Azure Clouds above, just being able to rank on the proclamation was an achievement in and of itself.

Of course, for figures such as Qiu Shan Jun, Gou Han Shi or some others who could be considered monsters amongst geniuses; those who had already managed to enter the Proclamation of Golden Distinction before the age of 20 were in an entirely different league.

Even Xuan Yuan Po himself didn't understand how he was placed upon the proclamation, let alone others; a lot of the students knew of Xuan Yuan Po and that he was a promising student of Star Seizer Academy, but he didn't perform anything on the first night of the Ivy League gathering before being crippled by Tian Hai Ya'er, imperial court doctors and professors of Star Seizer Academy had both admitted to his condition being unrecoverable, so why would he suddenly be ranked on the Azure Clouds?

Tang Thirty-Six stood on his toes to raise himself and patted Xuan Yuan Po around the waist, rousing the stunned youth from his stupor, before asking with much doubt: "What's going on? What have you been up to lately? Have you been secretly traversing the academy walls at night and going out for duels? Don't tell me you've been going to Star Seizer Academy looking for matches?"

A lot of the people present were having the same thoughts as Tang Thirty-Six; Xuan Yuan Po's injury should have already healed and he secretly had a match against some youth that is already ranked on the proclamation, only this could explain current events. As for how the Council of Divine Ordinance came across this secret; with the full backing of various human powers and White Emperor City, what kind of secrets in this world could be hidden from the council?

Tang Thirty-Six turned his gaze towards Chen Chang Sheng and said: "When did you finish healing his injury? You could have at least told me; this requires some alcohol to celebrate at the very least."

"Alcohol is bad for your health." Chen Chang Sheng answered in habit, before coming back to his senses and shaking his head, stating: "Xuan Yuan Po's injury is in the process of healing, but it's not completely healed."

Tang Thirty-Six lightly crossed his eyebrows and said to Xuan Yuan Po: "If your injury is still healing, then you shouldn't be fighting, competing for a such a fickle spot on the rankings is not worth it."

Xuan Yuan Po shook his head, replying: "I've been with all of you at Orthodox Academy every day, eating and cooking, I haven't left at all."

Tang Thirty-Six felt shocked: "How did you manage to get onto the proclamation then?"

Xuan Yuan Po gave his honest reply: “I don’t know.”

Tang Thirty-Six was too shocked for words, thinking that this yao youth had only recently travelled from far away to human lands and while still recovering from an injury, had managed to enter the Proclamation of Azure clouds within half a year, without having had a single battle. Had Elder Tian Ji lost his senses, or was he implying that this youth was a secret child of the White Emperor? That would make him Luo Luo’s brother from a different mother, but from looking at them that night, it didn’t seem likely.

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His imagination began running wild, alongside the imaginations of a lot of the people present, their thoughts had begun to reach some far off tangent.

Thoughts are a fast process, so in truth, not much time had passed, after a brief period of commotion, the divine avenue had once again returned to being quiet.

The Hall of Oration’s sound projecting array continued to broadcast its message.

Akin to the autumn wind, the sound was crisp and clear.

The Council of Divine Ordinance’s evaluation of Xuan Yuan Po

was exceedingly simple and clear-cut.

“An abundance of True Essence, great strength, injury recoverable, possible to find a suitable secret art, alas, has great fortune, met an able teacher in the Capital, thus, honourable last mention upon the proclamation.”

The Proclamation of Azure Cloud's main aim was to encourage young geniuses to continually strive forwards, therefore, every time a new proclamation was issued, in order to avoid controversy, it would also include an evaluation, a reason. The evaluations were only a few short words, but exceedingly concise, being able to convince everyone, this was because those few words were personally from Elder Tian Ji.

The evaluation given meant he had a very high talent for cultivation, shocking strength and that his injury from Tian Hai Ya'er was treatable. After recovering, if he was to find a suitable secret art for yao cultivation, then his future was favourable. The most important part of the evaluation was that he had already met a suitable teacher in the Capital.

Xuan Yuan Po listened to the evaluation seriously, thinking to himself that his teacher was Her Highness, Luo Luo, therefore it naturally good fortune, as for Her Highness' teacher being Chen Chang Sheng... he unconsciously looked towards him, upon this moment, Tang Thirty-Six finally understood the meaning behind the Council of Divine Ordinance's evaluation; he looked towards Chen Chang Sheng and couldn't stop himself pensively shaking his head a few times.

Only those from Orthodox Academy would have understood the situation, outsiders would be unclear; upon thinking about the identity of Xuan Yuan Po's teacher and thinking of the words referring to a secret art for yao cultivation, people started paying attention to the Jin Yu Lu, who was besides the three youths and immediately started having feelings of realisation, believing that they had finally understood the meaning behind the evaluation.

Even though a lot of people did not understand the Council's reasoning for placing Xuan Yuan Po upon the proclamation, upon hearing Elder Tian Ji's evaluation, no one dared to question his judgement, regardless of any lingering feelings of unease or dissatisfaction; not to mention it was hardly the time to care about Xuan Yuan Po and Orthodox Academy.

Be it Orthodox Academy's enmity with the Ivy League schools, Chen Chang Sheng's engagement with Xu You Rong, or even the back and forth delving between the tradition and new factions of the Zhou Empire; for today, all of these topics were unimportant; from the Capital to White Emperor City; from Holy Maiden Peak to Limitless Valley (Wu Ya Valley); from Li Mountain to Scholartree Manor, or even that far away Old Snow City; everyone's attention was only drawn to one thing.

The same as it has always been, when the Proclamation of Azure Clouds is changed, the entire continent's attention would be focused upon it. Everyone would only listen to each name on the ranking as they were listed; let alone on such an occasion where the proclamation was being changed in late autumn, such a situation portended great changes and further captured the attention of the masses.

The autumn woods surrounding the divine avenue were silent, with only the sound of swaying trees in the wind and the occasionally pecking of birds; students and teachers from the schools located here and the clergy that had come to join the crowds had turned towards the direction of the Hall of Oration, giving their undivided attention towards listening to the proclamation, for fear of missing even a single word.

Sounds continued to travel from the Hall of Oration, with the entire Capital able to hear the names of youths that were being listed one by one.

Within those names, some were familiar, some were not; some were young geniuses that had already managed to establish themselves some time ago and some were like Xuan Yuan Po, individuals that had managed to suddenly emerge out of some remote wilderness. A lecturer from Li Palace even heard the name of an individual who had suddenly transferred into Li Palace College after passing the foundation trial of the Grand Examination and was so startled, he almost wrung off his beard in shock.

Apart from these names, the entire continent was in a state of calm.

Today, at Li Palace, at Scholartree Manor, at White Emperor City, at countless locations on the continent, countless youths were currently listening to these names in trepidation and anticipation; these names would cause some to cry, some to rejoice, some to fantasise, some to lose control; no one would deny themselves the chance to be ranked, and for those who had once

been ranked, they couldn't possibly accept the shock of being unlisted.

This, was the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.

Chapter 114 – The Proclamation Has New Entrants (3)

As time passed, the silence was gradually broken, cries occasionally arose from amongst the autumn woods, it seemed a student of Temple Seminary had entered the proclamation, following this, the crying of a girl could be heard, a senior from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green had fallen from her original ranking of 90 to one that exceeded 100.

In the proclamation's mid to latter rankings, as it had been for many years, most of the rankers were youths from the Southern Domain, with most of them from the Longevity Sect and Scholartree Manor; especially the Longevity Sect, living up to its reputation as to being the foremost Sect in the world. For the schools in the Capital, including Heavenly Academy, Star Seizer Academy and the three schools located here, their number of rankers combined only slightly edged ahead of the Longevity Sect.

A lot of people unconsciously turned their gazes towards the quiet guesthouse, Gou Han Shi and the other disciples of Li Shan Sect alongside other members of the Southern envoy group were currently staying there – Li Shan Sect was only a branch of the Longevity Sect; everyone knew that apart from Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi, the other members of the Divine State's Seven Laws would be listed upon the rankings, the proclamation had just yet to reach their names.

Upon thinking this point, students of Li Palace College, Temple Seminary and the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green began feeling a little depressed.

The teachers here were all too aware of the fact that the “blade” of the Longevity Sect was Li Mountain; the Longevity Sect’s strongest youths were all from Li Shan Sword Sect, but this would have been of little comfort for their students; all they could stress was that the cultivation methods of the Southern sects and Orthodox schools were similar in potency, with the Southern Sects concentrating upon building a quick and solid foundation, but for reaching the highest levels of cultivation, they did not show any inherent advantage over the various schools in the Capital, just taking the Proclamation of Liberation as an example, there didn’t exist any disparity in strength between the South and North.

Upon hearing this explanation, students of the Capital were slightly comforted, but they still couldn’t bring themselves to be happy, the Proclamation of Liberation wasn’t really a secret, and hadn’t had an update for many years, therefore couldn’t give an accurate assessment of current affairs; it must be understood, with the early entrance of Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi into the Proclamation of Golden Distinction, the Southern Sects already had a head start in two proclamations.

Due the current mood, both sides of the divine avenue once again became silent, with an air of tension; the Proclamation of Azure Clouds had already passed the middle rankings, and was starting to proclaim the names of the top 40, this caused not just the hot-blooded students, but also someone as stoic as Su Mo Yu to have trouble keeping their emotions in check.

Only Chen Chang Sheng was seemingly unperturbed by the proclamation, this was because he clearly understood that the proclamation had nothing to do with him; he wasn’t like Xuan

Yuan Po, who did not have the need to undergo Purification. Without having achieved Purification, there was no possibility of getting onto the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, even Elder Tian Ji's own child wouldn't make the exception.

But this was his first experience of the proclamation, and the first time he had seen such a scene, therefore it was a new experience; looking at the nervous expressions of his peers, he gradually also became nervous, with rising tension amongst other emotions, but this it wasn't enough to draw notice.

He looked at Tang Thirty-Six and consoled him: "There's no need to be nervous, as you just said to Xuan Yuan Po, even though this is the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, vying over such a transient position is meaningless, you need to look further ahead."

It had already been over half a year from when the proclamation was first updated, Tang Thirty-Six had only entered a single battle during the Ivy League gathering and subsequently never had another chance to show his strength. What's more, in that battle it was clear that his ability was below that of Qi Jian's, with Elder Tian Ji's insight, he couldn't have missed this point.

With this in mind, it was hard to gauge what will happen to his ranking in this update.

"Competing for a transient ranking is indeed meaningless, but I am already ranked upon the proclamation, if I were to drop in the rankings, then wouldn't I just be an embarrassment? I have to at least maintain my current position."

Tang Thirty-Six had his usual cool and proud expression, but his thin lips were faintly quivering; he replied very low voice and annoyed attitude.

Chen Chang Sheng helplessly answered: “You’re nervous to this point and yet you don’t think that’s embarrassing?”

Tang Thirty-Six snorted indignantly: “I’ve already said that it’s tiring to feign being lofty and stoic, not to mention...”

He turned to stare at Chen Chang Sheng and said: “How am I nervous?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “It’s pretty obvious.”

Tang Thirty-Six’s expression mildly changed, he lowered his voice and said: “Looks like I’m not feigning well enough.”

Chen Chang Sheng lightly lowered his gaze, looking upon his crumpled sleeves and said: “Your hands are shaking rather hard.”

“I’m just bored, I’m the type of person that can even joke with Gou Han Shi, what do you know about me?”

Tang Thirty-Six had a dour expression on his face, his voice was low and hoarse, he furtively placed his arms behind his back.

Chen Chang Sheng only gave out a laugh and didn't say anything else.

During their conversation, the voice from the Hall of Oration had already reached number Thirty-seven on the list, the next one was obviously Thirty-six; the Thirty-six Chen Chang Sheng was most familiar with, Tang Thirty-Six.

The surname was not Tang, they were not named as Tang Tang and had no relation to the Wen Shui family.

Everyone at the divine avenue turned to look towards Tang Thirty-Six, their surprise and confusion was apparent.

The atmosphere turned a little awkward and strange.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Tang Thirty-Six, and asked with some worry: "There shouldn't be a problem?"

Tang Thirty-Six didn't change his expression, only Chen Chang Sheng and Xuan Yuan Po, who were close to him could make out that his brows faintly twitched.

"It looks like I've advanced this time."

His words were completely lacking in confidence; no matter how you were to analyse it, there was little chance of him not making the rankings, if he wasn't ranked 36, then he must be ranked higher, yet he couldn't understand, on what basis would his rank

advance? His performance at the Ivy League gathering was not even to his own satisfaction.

The Hall of Oration's proclamation soon reached rank 33.

Sounds of praise came from the surroundings of Li Palace College, there were even sounds of clapping; Su Mo Yu calmly gave a formal gesture of gratitude. He was surprised that obtaining first place on the second night of the Ivy League gathering didn't improve his ranking, but maintaining the same position he had at the start of the year was still satisfactory, his main target was the Grand Examination after all.

He looked towards Tang Thirty-Six and gently knitted his eyebrows together, he couldn't shake a feeling of unease.

"Tang Tang, Orthodox Academy, Rank Thirty-two upon the Azure Clouds."

Upon that moment, the voice from the Hall of Oration clearly travelled to their location in the autumn woods, causing a ruckus amongst the gathered people, before chatter arose all around, with their shock clearly visible.

Tang Thirty-Six's eyebrow twitched, "I really hate being called Tang Tang."

Though his words were as such, he couldn't hide his delight from showing, delight that also carried puzzlement, he couldn't

understand why he had advanced 4 places. Just as Xuan Yuan Po didn't understand his inclusion in the proclamation... but he wasn't going to fuss over these details, his first course of action was to enjoy the glory of his 32nd position.

A ranking of 32 was coincidentally just higher than rank 33 by one.

He looked towards Su Mo Yu, with an expression that carried a sense of laughing yet not laughing; an indescribable animosity.

Su Mo Yu thought back to his words towards the group from Orthodox Academy; even for someone with his type of personality, he couldn't stop his expression from changing.

He had said to Tang Thirty-Six: "When you rank before me on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, you can come and tell me that my words today are wrong." He had also said to Xuan Yuan Po: "Wait till you're ranked upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, then you can talk to me." Yet, within but a blink of an eye, Xuan Yuan Po had entered the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and Tang Thirty-Six was ranked above him on the proclamation.

The divine avenue was silent, stares of female students from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green towards Tang Thirty-Six became ever more ardent; students from Temple Seminary became more sombre; while students of Li Palace College were like Su Mo Yu, their expressions became increasingly ugly.

"On what grounds did Xuan Yuan Po manage to place upon the

proclamation? And how did he manage to pass Senior?”

A student finally couldn't hold back and started questioning the validity of this year's new proclamation; to say that no one had dared to question the validity of the proclamation before, meant that no one dared to question it in front of the Council of Divine Ordinance or Elder Tian Ji, privately, there were obviously those who were frustrated and unsatisfied; today's event was too big of an insult to the students of Li Palace college, causing someone to lose their restraint and openly question the result.

Words full of resentment, like the ones from this student, were out of the reach of the Council, and even if they were to hear of it, it wouldn't affect them, therefore they wouldn't go out of their way to provide an explanation.

The evaluation from Elder Tian Ji arrived.

“This child is too lazy, would have otherwise already entered top ten, due to fortuitous circumstance, can no longer be lazy, a blessing.”

Elder Tian Ji's evaluation for each person that was listed on the proclamation, was concise and simple, enabling those who hear it to understand the reasoning behind the ranking and their strengths, yet for Tang Thirty-Six, there was no mention of his True Essence nor understanding of cultivation, only touching upon whether if he was lazy or not and touching upon something as vague as fortuitous circumstance.

Countless stares came to rest upon Tang Thirty-Six.

As used to feigning a cool and lofty persona as Tang Thirty-Six was, upon receiving such an evaluation from a peak expert like Elder Tian Ji, he could no longer maintain his expression.

He said while being embarrassed: “Not being lazy anymore is enough is it not?”

He understood what the fortuitous circumstance referred to; it was more than likely referring to his leaving Heavenly Academy and entering Orthodox Academy, or more specifically, his chance meeting with Chen Chang Sheng.

With someone like Chen Chang Sheng by his side, how could he continue to be lazy?

Upon thinking this point, he turned towards Chen Chang Sheng and seriously thanked him: “Greetings to Brother Fortuitous Circumstance.”

Upon hearing these words, those that understood its meaning had an immediate change in expression.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't answer; he was more interested in a different matter: “Does this mean I will now have to call you Tang Thirty-Two?”

Tang Thirty-Six's expression changed, thinking to himself that

he didn't like the sound of it; he needed to strive harder at the Grand Examination, vying for a better position and name by the time of the new proclamation in spring.

Only... was it going to be the Twenty-eight of the 28 constellations or was it going to be the Twelve from the 12 Knights? Three would obviously be even better, but the difficulty was also disproportionately high; Guan Fei Bai, Liang Ban Hu, alongside that wolf-child of the North were not easy to surpass, after thinking for a time, he suddenly thought of something more important and stopped his line of thought.

He raised his head towards Su Mo Yu, his lips lightly raising and maintaining an expression of laughing yet not laughing and silently said three words.

“You are wrong.”

Su Mo Yu's face turned green, but couldn't say anything in return.

A conflict of words between youths can only be considered an incident.

Today, the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was the most important event for the entire continent.

Xuan Yuan Po's inexplicable entry on the proclamation, Tang Thirty-Six's advancement of 4 positions to a ranking of Thirty-two

alongside the imminent question of a name change; with today's sudden update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, Orthodox Academy was undoubtedly capturing the attention of many people. That academy which had once experienced a pinnacle of glory, upon lying dormant for tens of years, had finally reappeared before the world, who could have expected that its appearance was immediately accompanied by re-found glory?

The sudden update to the proclamation had to be due to a tumultuous change, even if it wasn't comparable to the world-shocking appearance of Qiu Shan Jun or Xu You Rong, it would still be something that could shock everyone. This type of change could only be something related to the top rankings on the proclamation; upon reaching rank 11 on the proclamation, the news transmitted by the Hall of Oration, had its first bewildering revision.

Chapter 115 – The Top Ten

The name that appeared for rank 11 was unexpected; it was not Qi Jian from Li Shan Sword Sect, but was the pride of Heavenly Academy, Zhuang Huan Yu. In regards to Zhuang Huan Yu, the council did not offer any evaluation, this implied the council did not consider his strength to have changed much over the past half a year.

The one that replaced Zhuang Huan Yu in tenth position was Qi Jian, this switch in positions was perplexing for many people; Zhuang Huan Yu had triumphed over Qi Jian in the past and Qi Jian had only just recently lost to Tang Thirty-Six at the Ivy League gathering; with this result, not only did his ranking not slip, it actually advanced?

The evaluation that was transmitted from the Hall of Oration, those few short words, gave an exceedingly high appraisal for his performance at the Ivy League gathering. Students and teachers alike that were at the divine avenue, intently listened to the evaluation, but Chen Chang Sheng didn't pay any attention, he turned his gaze towards the guesthouse, thinking to himself as to if it will continue to remain quiet.

The naming had entered its most important phase, reaching the Proclamation of Azure Cloud's top ten, names that managed to appear here, were all the most talented geniuses on the continent.

Following Qi Jian's name, unexpectedly, yet somehow reasonably, the next person listed was not Luo Luo; the ninth position belonged to a young genius from Scholartree Manor.

Chen Chang Sheng hadn't heard of that young genius' name before, and thought to himself that this individual should have been placed higher in the previous proclamation; his main concern was with Luo Luo's final ranking and advancement.

What followed was completely out of everyone's expectations.

The eighth rank was not Luo Luo, neither was seventh, that position belonged to Liang Ban Hu; this eminent disciple of Li Shan Sword Sect, the Divine State's Fifth Law, had placed upon the sixth position for the past two years, it would seem he had followed the fate of the other geniuses that had been consecutively pushed down the rankings by Luo Luo's rise.

Chen Chang Sheng lowered his head and intently listened, he would have been satisfied with Luo Luo placing within the top 6, but he couldn't help feeling that she would continue to place higher; he knew of Luo Luo's improvement at Orthodox Academy over these past few months and hoped the council also recognised this.

The divine avenue was surrounding by uncontrollable exclamations of shock. At this moment, a lot of people had already managed to have a faint inkling of the reason for today's sudden update to the proclamation, the reason... the sixth rank still wasn't Luo Luo.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't pay attention to the name, he gently clasped his hands together within his sleeves in agitation; he hoped

for Luo Luo's continual advancement, but also knew of the difficulty.

Following the exclamations of shock came a blanket of silence; undoubtedly, a lot of locations in the Capital, such as Heavenly Academy or Star Seizer Academy were currently also silent, quietly waiting for Luo Luo's name to appear.

The Hall of Oration's sound projecting array was unaffected by the tension, and continued to methodically read out the fifth rank: Guan Fei Bai.

It was Guan Fei Bai... it was actually Guan Fei Bai... the Divine State's Fourth Law Guan Fei Bai; he had fallen from the position he held onto for three years.

Countless gazes fell upon the Cedrus trees surrounding the campus at the right end of the divine avenue, but the guesthouse remained silent. The gazes then turned towards Chen Chang Sheng and the other students of Orthodox Academy on the divine avenue, the gazes felt exceedingly complicated.

Everyone was shocked and confused.

Judging from the rankings of the proclamation, the Council of Divine Ordinance had fully acknowledged the results of the battle between Orthodox Academy and Li Shan Sword Sect at the Ivy League gathering. But that battle was different from a regular duel, how could one judge who was better or worse?

If one were to follow established convention, even if the council was to acknowledge that battle's result, it should have resulted in Guan Fei Bai falling to rank 9 and Luo Luo rising by one to two places, how could Guan Fei Bai only drop by one rank and Luo Luo rise to rank within the top 4?

It has to be known that anyone within the top 10 on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was amongst the most talented young geniuses on the continent, the difference between these individuals is small, therefore the evaluations had to be rigorous; even a small advancement was considerably difficult.

With Guan Fei Bai falling to the fifth rank, the fourth rank should naturally be Luo Luo, upon everyone's expectation settling on hearing her royal name's proclamation, something unexpected once again occurred.

The divine avenue was suddenly in an uproar; the sounds of chatter from the gathered people suddenly exploded, disturbing countless migrating birds amongst the woods, akin to wanting to overturn and embroil the calm autumn skies.

The fourth name on the rankings, was not Her Highness, Luo Luo, but someone else.

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly befuddled, and asked: "What's going on, who is this person?"

Tang Thirty-Six at this moment had a face full of shock, and took a couple of minutes to steady himself, before saying: "The Divine

State's Third Law; after Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi entered the Proclamation of Golden Distinction, he was Li Shan Sword Sect's strongest member on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds."

He sombrely added: "He was always ranked third upon the Azure Clouds."

Chen Chang Sheng took a moment before he fully understood, or more accurately, he took a moment before he fully recovered his senses, the edge of his mouth twitched slightly; he wanted to suppress his smile, but he couldn't control himself.

... Luo Luo was amongst the top three of the Azure Clouds.

As the tutor of Luo Luo, and having spent such a long time together at Orthodox Academy, though they were not romantically linked, they had a deep friendship and shared experiences; he currently felt more elated than if he were to be personally placed upon the proclamation.

Three, this number has always had a special meaning for people, perhaps it was because of its stability, or perhaps it was due to some sort of complicated psychological effect, but three was something special.

For example, the Grand Examination only had three grades and the First Banner only took three people.

Therefore, the Proclamation of Azure Cloud's top ten gave one

sort of feeling, while the top three gave another type of feeling.

Being listed within the top three amongst the Azure Clouds was indication of Luo Luo standing upon the peak of her generation.

From this moment onwards, she wouldn't just possess a noble and powerful bloodline, she would also possess a noble and powerful position, what's more, the latter was something she had earned through painstaking cultivation and was not something related to her descent.

This was an indescribable honour.

Chen Chang Sheng lifted his head towards the endless steps that lead to the Hall of Clear Virtue, wondering if Luo Luo had managed to receive this news from within the Pope's Green Leaf World.

The shock did not end here however.

The third rank upon the Azure Clouds was still not Luo Luo.

The divine avenue was silent; everyone was already numb from shock.

Cries of shock arose from across the entire Li Palace complex.

Tang Thirty-Six's face turned pale and he said in a bewildered voice: "How could this..."

Chen Chang Sheng was not familiar with the geniuses that ranked amongst the top 10, therefore his reaction was not as severe as Tang Thirty-Six's, but upon remembering that night at Orthodox Academy, the scene of Luo Luo politely and cutely standing beside Chen Chang Sheng, he had a hard time accepting; that dainty looking girl, was actually able to triumph over that cold-blooded wolf-child, who lived within the blizzards of the North and relied upon solitarily hunting the demon race for survival.

The moment had finally arrived.

Everyone had waited for this name; no one could have guessed from the start that they would have waited for so long in order to hear it.

“Orthodox Academy, Bai Di Luo Heng, Number Two of the Azure Clouds.”

The silent divine avenue remained silent, the surrounding Li Palace complex that was already in an uproar, once again erupted in cries, even the quiet guesthouse that was housing the Southern envoys had faint hints of activity.

The entire Capital, the entire continent, at this moment in time, was in the midst of shock.

Bai Di Luo Heng, the yao race's Royal Princess, was previously ranked at ninth on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, within a few

short months she had entered the top three and placed second.

Everyone understood that advancing on a ranking such as the Proclamation of Azure Clouds increased in difficulty the higher you moved; jumping from rank 9 to rank 2 was unimaginably more difficult than even jumping from last place to a spot within the top 10.

What kind of monstrous advancement speed was this?

Upon the entire history of the proclamation, this type of event was exceptionally scarce, within the last few decades, only the entry of Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong were comparable.

Could it be, that within the eyes of the council, Luo Luo had already reached the level of Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong?

A lot of people pondered upon this question, but upon thinking back to the Ivy League gathering, even though Luo Luo's performance was strong, it couldn't have been said to greatly exceed her peers, or at least, it wasn't enough to satisfy everyone; on what basis did she surpass that wolf-child of the North?

Those seeking an answer would not have missed the evaluation from the council.

Elder Tian Ji's evaluation for Luo Luo was as brief and simple as ever; direct and blunt, akin to the style of the White Emperor clan: it directly stated that she had overcome the difficulties that a

member of the yao race would face when cultivating, and that through the talent granted by her tyrannical bloodline, apart from individuals like Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong, no one could hope to match against her.

Such a domineering evaluation caused everyone to become bewildered, causing many to miss the final words from Elder Tian Ji, which pointed out she had met a brilliant teacher that was crucial to her breakthrough.

But some managed to hear these words, such as Su Mo Yu and Tang Thirty-Six.

Su Mo Yu looked towards Chen Chang Sheng, his emotions were extremely complicated and conflicted.

Tang Thirty-Six looked towards him, he could only feel admiration.

No matter how calm a personality Chen Chang Sheng had, at this moment, he couldn't stop himself from feeling elated, from feeling proud.

Xuan Yuan Po's injury will be cured by him, Luo Luo's problem with cultivation was solved by him; today, three members of Orthodox Academy ascended upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, this was all something he should be proud of.

But at the next moment, he quickly returned to being calm, a

genuine sense of calm... the message from the Hall of Oration was still ongoing, the Proclamation of Azure Clouds still had a single name to come.

The things before him that he could be proud of, were not strong enough in front of that name.

At this moment, everyone at the scene already knew that the reason for the sudden update was Her Highness, Luo Luo's incredible improvement, therefore interest had begun to dwindle.

This wasn't due to any disrespect for the remaining name, nor was it because the first ranking was unimportant, but from two years ago, for three times running, that name remained in first position; it already had no appeal.

No one could imagine any other name appearing in that position, unless she was the one to will it.

“Xu You Rong, the Nan Xi (Southern Creeks) Institute, First Amongst the Azure Clouds.”

Chapter 116 – Declaration

Xu You Rong, that was a name known to everyone in the world, but no one else would have had the same turbulent emotions as Chen Chang Sheng did upon hearing that name.

In the past, at the old temple in Xi Ning village, upon first seeing that name on the betrothal vow, his age was still tender and he didn't understand many things, but he knew what it meant to be shy, he naturally had a lot of thoughts about his future with her; a girl with such a name, what would she look like? Did she have long locks of hair and a kind, gentle heart?

Following on, due to the circumstances of fate, he stopped thinking about the betrothal, and the name slowly faded from his memory, until he came to the Capital and experienced many things; that name brought him much ridicule and hardship, causing him to find it unpleasant. At the inn, it started to infuriate him; at the derelict garden, or even at that most crucial moment in Wei Yang Palace, that name continued to appear before him.

He clearly understood, even though her letter assented to their betrothal, it wasn't going to be so simple, it had another side to it, maybe his status as her fiancé was only an excuse, but she had helped him with this, therefore that name was no longer that unpleasant, but he still couldn't bring himself to feel any inklings of fondness for it.

The experiences of ridicule and mocking he experienced this morning at the divine avenue was due to that name, he could no longer avoid that name intruding upon his life and the pressure or

trauma it brings.

Should he actually feel gratitude towards her? No, his main concern right now was the Grand Examination. In this battle to change his fate, if he could surpass her, and break free of the influence of that name, he would be content, though the possibility of this in the eyes of others was near non-existent.

Luo Luo is already approaching you; how far is the gap between us?

Chen Chang Sheng's retracted his gaze towards the Hall of Clear Virtue and turned it towards the far off Southern realm, quietly contemplating.

The broadcast from the Hall of Oration had stopped, this sudden update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds during mid-autumn had come to an end, but the crowd that had gathered at the divine avenue did not disperse and the teachers didn't start telling students to return to their classes.

... Chen Chang Sheng continued to stand upon the divine avenue.

Everyone at the Capital knew Orthodox Academy only had four students, and that in today's update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, three of them were listed. Her Highness, Luo Luo, was the highest ranking one, rising from the ninth position to second.

Whether in terms of their student population in comparison to

their ranking members, or the positioning of those ranked, Orthodox Academy was unquestionably the biggest victor in the most recent proclamation; neither Heavenly Academy or Temple Seminary from the Ivy League could match; schools that had been prominent in recent years, such as Scholartree Manor, the Nan Xi Institute or even the Longevity Sect could not compare with Orthodox Academy's achievement.

Everyone looked towards Chen Chang Sheng.

He was the first student of Orthodox Academy; before his appearance, the academy was nothing more than a cold graveyard that was on the verge of disappearing within the annals of history itself from the long years of lacking any new students. But upon his appearance, Orthodox Academy was once again brought before everyone, with its transformation silently starting.

This youth couldn't complete his Purification and was thus unable to cultivate, therefore he had no right to appear upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, but the evaluations from the Council of Divine Ordinance made it clear; things such as fortuitous circumstance, a brilliant teacher; what did they refer to? Orthodox Academy's current splendour was all attributable to him.

Was this kind of youth really the trash that was being ridiculed from before? As Gou Han Shi had said this morning, if he were to be a toad, then what were the students that were currently here? Were all these people spongers as well? Does he really need the backing of Her Highness or the use of a betrothal vow in order to establish himself upon this world?

Su Mo Yu said he wasn't truly strong; then what was the true definition of strength?

Tang Thirty-Six stared at the group from Temple Seminary, glaring at the student that had mocked Orthodox Academy the hardest this morning, gave out a cold laugh and said: "For visionless people, even if they were to crawl up to the top of the Mausoleum of Books, they wouldn't be able to recognise a single word within."

The student's face turned pale.

"... this is what we call a proverb."

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the crowd and continued with an expressionless face. It was clear as to what he was referring to; since the Ivy League gathering, a lot people mocked Chen Chang Sheng as to being a toad that wishes to dine upon the Phoenix; this was brought up this morning and joked as to being close to becoming a proverb.

The divine avenue was silent.

At this moment, Chen Chang Sheng suddenly spoke out.

"You were saying what it means to have true strength..."

While saying this, he looked towards Su Mo Yu. The students of Li Palace College had a drastic change in expression; thinking that he intended to follow Tang Thirty-Six and mock Su Mo Yu.

Contrary to their expectations however, he said: “Your words have merit; I may be able to help my companions become stronger, but if I don’t want to become a burden, then I need to become strong myself. I hope that I can become stronger by the time of the Grand Examination, we’ll meet again at that time.”

Upon finishing those words, he gestured a formal farewell and turned around, heading off along the divine avenue.

Su Mo Yu gazed at his disappearing figure, hints of respect evident on his face, returned the gesture of farewell and said: “We’ll meet again at the Grand Examination.”

Upon seeing the silence surrounding both sides of the divine avenue, Tang Thirty-Six felt an invigorating sense of glee; he laughed out loud and said: “It won’t be easy to meet at the Grand Examination, after all, his aim is to get...”

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t even turn his head, and just said: “Xuan Yuan Po, stop him.”

In the mind of Xuan Yuan Po, Chen Chang Sheng was now a classmate, a teacher and the benefactor that saved his life, not to mention his Grand Master from the perspective of Her Highness. Upon hearing those words, he had no hesitation in extending his fan-like hands and smothering Tang Thirty-Six’s entire face,

before lifting him up and carrying him across his shoulders.

“Un... un... un...”

With Tang Thirty-Six's ability, he could have easily defeated Xuan Yuan Po, but he couldn't bring himself to raise his hand; upon being covered by Xuan Yuan Po, he was immediately silenced and could only let out small sounds of struggling; not being able to declare the words he had put so much energy into preparing made him agonised.

Xuan Yuan Po on the other hand, wasn't discomfited in the slightest, he was actually rather happy, being listed on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds made him uncontrollably jubilant, but he didn't know how to express himself. With both, feelings of jubilation and vigour in excess, he didn't know how to control himself and he started running faster and faster, while carrying Tang Thirty-Six and occasionally smacking him on the back; they very quickly approached the main gate of Li Palace.

Chen Chang Sheng gave out a laugh and followed behind; Jin Yu Lu also followed in suit while laughing.

Under a mild warmth, surrounded by the signs of Autumn, within the quiet Li Palace, three youths ran off into the setting sun, with occasional outbursts amongst them.

This scene, set within the eyes of those gathered here, remained a topic of conversation for many years to come.

Yet no one noticed, atop those never-ending steps, that was akin to the long path towards cultivating The Way, atop the highest reaches of the Hall of Clear Virtue, Luo Luo was watching them; with the evening mist upon her small face, a gleaming smile was present.

With the departure of the youths from Orthodox Academy, the crowds that had gathered around the divine avenue also began dispersing; apart from the sounds of footsteps, little else could be heard, everyone was still in the midst of shock or contemplation and thus, even the sound of discussion was absent.

Those who were shocked with the achievements of Orthodox Academy on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, were mostly students, while those that were in contemplation, were mostly the instructors and clergy of Li Palace. As adults, they were more contemplative than the younger generation, and thus, had more questions, especially upon the reasoning behind the Council of Divine Ordinance's evaluations, which they struggled to understand in full.

... they were not questioning its validity, but they found Elder Tian Ji's evaluation of the three listed Orthodox Academy students strange.

Taking Xuan Yuan Po as an example, entering the proclamation without having battled, with the reasoning being expectations for his future; this was bound to raise speculation, yet the council didn't seem to care. Yet another example, taking Tang Thirty-Six and Her Highness, Luo Luo's reason for being listed, it was as if the council had purposefully used the evaluations to emphasise Chen

Chang Sheng's role and importance.

Some of the contemplators started to have inklings of some even more unthinkable possibilities.

... this fall's sudden update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was due to Her Highness, Luo Luo's stunning improvement, but at the same time, the council also wanted to make the entire continent aware of Chen Chang Sheng's existence?

If this was to be true, what reasoning could there be behind it?

At the moment crowd had almost dispersed, an ancient sounding voice arose within the woods.

“Do you all want to know what Tang Tang was going to say? What he wanted to tell you was...”

Upon hearing those words, the people who were leaving, immediately stilled their steps.

The ancient sounding voice continued, “... Chen Chang Sheng's aim is to become the man to take the first place amongst the First Banner in the Grand Examination.”

The woods erupted into an uproar.

Chen Chang Sheng wanted to take the first position upon the

First Banner?

The crowd turned towards the source of the voice in a stunned stupor.

The Education Board's Archbishop, His Eminence, Mei Li Sha, under the support of Minister Xin, emerged from within the woods.

This elderly person, who had lived for untold years, already had a crooked posture. A face full of age spots and wrinkles, partially obscured, but couldn't hide the joy and satisfaction within his eyes.

This joy and satisfaction was obviously for Chen Chang Sheng.

Everyone hurriedly paid their respects in a formal greeting, taking care not to perform anything that might be taken as an affront, yet their faces still showed the shock and disbelief from hearing what the Archbishop had said.

Even if Orthodox Academy's achievement today upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was attributable to Chen Chang Sheng; as Su Mo Yu had said, and Chen Chang Sheng himself had admitted to, the Grand Examination was something you had to participate in yourself. Chen Chang Sheng had yet to complete his Purification, how was he going to handle the Grand Examination that was imminent? No matter how you looked at it, even entering the Three Grades was impossible, let alone taking first place upon the First Banner.

Priest Huo had an expressionless face, but his eyes revealed a shred of awe; several clergymen, upon exchanging glances with the instructors, could tell the shock they all felt.

Their questions from before were seemingly going to be answered soon; that was the intention, certain parties felt that the display at the Ivy League gathering and the pressure on Chen Chang Sheng from his betrothal to Xu You Rong was still insufficient; some swelling movement from currents beneath the Capital were about to break through the earth.

Yet, what was the reason behind all of this?

The Archbishop looked at the crowd and said: “There isn’t any reason and there doesn’t have to be a reason; since he has already stated that he will take first place upon the First Banner at the Grand Examination, then I will trust his ability to take it.”

The people surrounding the divine avenue didn’t dare to raise their body.

Priest Huo and the other clergy of Li Palace were already prostrating.

Regardless of whether if they believed or not, the Archbishop’s word was something they could only acknowledge.

In front of the Archbishop, no one dared to question or doubt.

But this declaration that the Archbishop had announced in place of Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng, would quickly spread across the entirety of Li Palace, the entire Capital and the entire continent. Once that had happened, many would hold it in disdain, ridicule, scorn and anger, with all blame being held against Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng.

The question still lingered.

What was the purpose of this?

Chapter 117 – The Starlight Between My Fingers (1)

The Archbishop didn't say anything else, and slowly left under the support of Minister Xin. Under the twilight, his crooked old stature looked a little lonely; giving a different feel from the three youths of Orthodox Academy when they ran off into the sunset; the sun was really setting for the life of this elder and no one could predict if it would rise again after setting.

It was only after a long time before the gathered people dared to rise, gazing at the fading back of the Archbishop into the twilight; they had complicated expressions, but no one dared to show any disrespect.

After spring, the Archbishop had an increase to his wrinkles and age spots, ageing considerably; middle-age for humans was a drawn out process, especially for those who had achieved considerable success in cultivating The Way, a process of at least hundreds of years; he had seemingly caught up on his ageing within just a few short months, with hundreds of years being piled on at once.

Why had the Archbishop aged so much within such a short time? It was naturally due to there being too many things he had to supervise; in the eyes of others, this was also a reminder for the Orthodoxy and the entire continent, that this was an elder who was from the same generation as the Pope; the only clergyman in the world that was comparable to and could counter His Holiness, The Pope.

From the past impressions of the people, His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, was an absolute confidant to the Pope. The Education Board, under his guidance, had an exceptionally high position, but it was still just one, out of the Orthodoxy's Six Sacred Churches and otherwise did not stand out; a lot of people were not even aware of its existence, but now, everything had changed.

Orthodox Academy had once again appeared in the Capital, and some elders and factions from within the Orthodoxy had started to express dissenting voices against the Pope; in the Autumn Rain incident that happened before the Education Board, people were dispersed through the use of horses; blood was spilled and countless casualties resulted, behind all of that was the old crooked figure of the Archbishop.

It wasn't until this moment, that the people finally took notice, he had the support of countless people from within the Orthodoxy; the resources and power he currently had at his command was fast approaching the level of becoming a threat to the Pope.

For him to appear today at Li Palace, this made Priest Huo and the other clergy of the palace too stunned for words. That's correct, the Archbishop was the architect behind Orthodox Academy's revival, and was the biggest patron of Chen Chang Sheng's group; he had expectations of the academy, and expectations on Chen Chang Sheng being able to rank first upon the First Banner at the Grand Examination and was helping him to declare this to the world; he must have had his reasons for this, but the glory achieved at the Ivy League gathering, coupled with his betrothal to Xu You Rong, wasn't this already eye-catching enough? To state that he will take the first position on the First Banner; for the Archbishop to place such an enormous amount of

pressure on Chen Chang Sheng, what purpose did he have?

“Pressure is a form of motivation.”

In the Li Palace under twilight, a horse-drawn carriage was parked, within the carriage, the Archbishop was seated opposite to Minister Xin, he casually said, “The proclamation was only the first dish, the main is the Grand Examination, a gathering from all corners and the gazes of thousands, only under this, can help to mature him at the fastest possible rate.”

Minister Xin was in quiet contemplation for a moment, before answering: “I only fear that the pressure is too great and Chen Chang Sheng won’t be able to cope.”

The Archbishop didn’t say anything else, and did not seek to further inform this seemingly loyal subordinate, contrary to the imagination of outside observers, Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy were never a tool used by him or other elders from within the Orthodoxy as a challenge to the Pope, conversely, everything related to Chen Chang Sheng was agreed to and confirmed by both, he and the Pope.

Only this, could make him mature in the shortest amount of time possible, only this, could make the entire continent aware of his existence, stopping the eyes of people from straying off his visage, as to what this pressure can bring to Chen Chang Sheng, he and the Pope weren’t overly concerned, because they were very clear; that youth had already been living for the past few years under the greatest pressure possible.

At Heavenly Academy's main gate, the stone wall was surrounded by people. At Star Seizer Academy's main gate, a lecturer was busy carving onto the stone wall. The Proclamation of Azure Clouds had a new update, the stone walls of the main schools and academies also required updating. The top position didn't need to be touched, because it was still occupied by Xu You Rong, but a lot of other changes had occurred. This Autumn's proclamation was suddenly changed and the biggest victor was Orthodox Academy; a school with only four students, actually managed to have three of them listed upon the Azure Clouds; with Bai Di Luo Heng occupying the second position, a splendid achievement.

At the gates of the various schools in the Capital, people raised their heads to look at the names engraved upon the stone wall, their emotions were complicated, especially those who had previously participated in the siege against Orthodox Academy and attacked the students. Following the update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, another shocking piece of news also rapidly spread out, this was the declaration that His Eminence, The Archbishop, had personally declared in place of Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng.

In the Grand Examination, Chen Chang Sheng wanted to obtain first place upon the First Banner.

The reactions of everyone who heard this news, was that it had to be a joke, who could believe this? But upon confirmation, the majority of people were stunned to the point of disbelief.

If Her Highness, Luo Luo, was not the daughter of the White Emperor, or no one knew of her status; if she were to enter the Grand Examination as a member of Orthodox Academy, then she could have had a chance against Gou Han Shi and the other experts of the various participating sects, but the Archbishop had stated very clearly that it was Chen Chang Sheng who intended to place first upon the First Banner, not Orthodox Academy.

The Chen Chang Sheng that was known to the entire Capital as to being unable to complete his Purification?

Due to Orthodox Academy's performance at the Ivy League gathering and the evaluations from the Council of Divine Ordinance, there was no longer anyone that dared to consider him trash, but from their view... he was still someone that couldn't cultivate; even if good fortune was to suddenly descend upon him, and he was to complete his Purification, with only three short months left before the Grand Examination, what chance did he have of surpassing the countless geniuses of his generation that had already successfully started cultivation years before him?

Impossible, even if he was someone like Xu You Rong or Qiu Shan Jun, with a gifted bloodline, he still wouldn't be able to achieve this; this would be a complete breach of logic and reason.

In regards to Orthodox Academy's achievement at the Ivy League gathering and the declaration that Chen Chang Sheng wanted to place first upon the First Banner, different people had different reactions.

In an isolated area of the Heavenly Academy campus, Zhuang

Huan Yu sat beside a disused well, his entire body was soaked through with its cold, icy water; his dark hair was sprawled across his figure and continually dripped onto the floor, forming a puddle beneath him. The reason for this, was because he felt burning hot, the reason for this, was because he was infuriated.

He had fallen from rank 10 to rank 11 on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, being overtaken by Qi Jian, this was an injustice to him. Qi Jian was someone that had lost to him before and his goal was Qiu Shan Jun, therefore, having entered the top 10, he no longer bothered issuing challenges. On what basis was this judgement made? Didn't the Council of Divine Ordinance usually use the results of personal duels as the basis for their evaluations?

His wet hair draped across his eyes, blocking out his sharp gaze. Thinking of his little junior, nay... Her Highness, Luo Luo's current position on the proclamation, was enough to drive him into a frenzy, but he immediately calmed himself, with only his eyes showing a hint of red. He had once thought that he didn't need to prove his strength in front of others, but he now knew he was wrong. That Chen Chang Sheng wanted to place first upon the First Banner? Junior Luo Luo called him Sir? Very well, Zhuang Huan Yu raised his head, finding that he longed for the date of the Grand Examination to quickly arrive.

At the Tian Hai clan's manor, the current family head, Tian Hai Cheng Wu, and his son, Tian Hai Sheng Xue, had a brief discussion over today's update to the proclamation and the declaration that was made.

“If Chen Chang Sheng was to be able to place first upon the First

Banner, then he really might be able to marry Xu You Rong into his family... but this is impossible.”

“I agree, this is impossible.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue calmly replied to his father, his pearly white face didn't reveal any reaction; he didn't care as to whether Chen Chang Sheng could complete his Purification, even if Chen Chang Sheng was to come across multiple miracles, he still wouldn't care. He knew that Chen Chang Sheng wouldn't succeed; he himself had returned from the faraway Yung Xue pass to the Capital in order to achieve only one goal and that was to place first upon the First Banner.

In the anterior section of the Li Palace complex, behind the Cedrus trees lining the divine avenue, the guesthouse that was hosting the Southern envoy group was still as quiet as it was during the day.

Gou Han Shi was sat upon a long chair that was beside the veranda, looking at the sectioned off night sky that was visible through the courtyard's skylight. He quietly contemplated for a lengthy amount of time, as if he wished to discern some sort of truth from the myriad of stars above.

Liang Ban Hu, Guan Fei Bai and Qi Jian all sat on chairs to the side, quietly discussing something. Elder Xiao Song Gong had left, alongside the Qiu Shan family head, those elders who had come for the betrothal, had already embarked on the journey towards returning to the South. They had to participate in the Grand Examination and thus remained; without their elders around,

these youths from Li Shan Sword Sect were evidently more relaxed.

“Is there even the possibility?” Liang Ban Hu asked with his eyebrows knotted in a frown.

Guan Fei Bai quietly contemplated for some time and replied, “No matter how you look at it, it’s impossible.”

Qi Jian rather timidly shifted his position forwards and asked: “Has there ever been something similar in the past?”

The topic of discussion amongst these three youths of Li Shan Sword Sect was naturally whether Chen Chang Sheng could place first upon the First Banner at the Grand Examination.

As the Seven Laws of the Divine State that had forcefully swept across the proclamation in recent years, for them to discuss the prospects of a youth that hadn’t even achieved Purification in such a serious and earnest way would have shocked any onlookers. It was obvious that the Ivy League gathering and today’s evaluations from the Council of Divine Ordinance had caused Chen Chang Sheng to become a source of pressure for these proud and confident youths.

Qi Jian had asked for past examples, but what he was looking for was a record, the three fellow disciples turned to look at Gou Han Shi.

Gou Han Shi retracted his gaze from the stars and stared at his juniors, shaking his head and laughing: “There hasn’t been anything like this in the past.”

His words were spoken softly, without any intent to end the conversation, but it still gave the impression of being irrefutable.

Liang Ban Hu and Guan Fei Bai let out inexplicable sighs of relief.

Qi Jian continued to have signs of worry on his face and said: “Even if there hasn’t been anything similar in the past, it doesn’t mean it’s impossible for the future.”

“Little junior has logic in his words, but I think the possibility is low, within a short three months, you cannot achieve Ethereal Opening from Purification... this isn’t a possibility.”

Gou Han Shi continued: “This isn’t a problem of cultivation, but a simple calculation, discounting Purification and Meditation and only considering the need to open the door to the Ethereal Palace; this would require the use of Starlight for one-hundred nights, unless there really exists a legendary item for extending time, Chen Chang Sheng will not be able to achieve Ethereal Opening by the time of the Grand Examination.”

He had read ten-thousand scrolls, and understood the concept that mathematics does not lie, therefore he was certain of his reasoning.

Upon hearing these words, the others finally understood their second senior's certainty.

Without achieving the Ethereal Opening realm by the time of the Grand Examination, Chen Chang Sheng could not achieve first place upon the First Banner.

This was because, their second senior had already achieved Ethereal Opening.

There were also a few other students from the younger generation that might come to the Zhou Empire's Capital for the Grand Examination who had already achieved Ethereal Opening.

The Ethereal Opening realm was a stage of life and death; it was also a dividing-line. Within and without this dividing-line were two different worlds.

Within the blizzards of the Northern Reaches, a lone youth turned Southwards, his fingertips stained with blood.

Outside of the South's Scholartree Manor, a number of green-robed scholars bid farewell to their peers.

Upon various corners of the central continent, youths that were entering the Grand Examination, began moving.

What was different from past years was that they all had the same target in mind.

That target, was the name, Chen Chang Sheng.

“This is only an attempt to muster recognition... though, the momentum is certainly impressive.” The Divine Empress followed the pond until she reached the walls of the Imperial Palace. She extended her hand and picked a wild chrysanthemum before handing it behind her and said: “If it wasn’t for the age of Chen Chang Sheng being far too young, I would have suspicions on the intentions of those people.”

She didn’t have anyone behind her, it was only the Black Goat.

The Black Goat gently leaned its head, avoiding the wild chrysanthemum that was being extended, expressing a lack of interest in the food.

The Divine Empress shook her head and extended her hand to push open the door, crossing the long and quiet passage and taking the Black Goat with her to the Hundred Herb Garden, “You haven’t been here for some years, if there’s anything you want to eat, then go eat it.”

The Hundred Herb Garden was filled with rare and precious medicinal herbs and fruits; using these reagents to create medicine would fetch high prices, even the elite of the Capital would have trouble acquiring a quantity, but for the Divine Empress, these were nothing more than nibbles for the Black Goat; not to mention it had to depend on if the Black Goat felt like eating.

Outside of the palace, there has been a rumour that the Black Goat which pulled the Little Green Bamboo Carriage was personally raised by Lady Mo Yu, this wasn't correct... neither was the Black Goat personally raised by the Divine Empress. Conversely, in those long years past, when Taizong Emperor had first confined her to the isolation room of the Hundred Herb Garden, she had to often endure hunger, it was this Black Goat that had brought fruits for her from time to time.

Reaching the stone table, the Divine Empress began drinking tea, there were clearly no servants here, yet unknown when, the teapot had tea inside; upon pouring into a cup, there was still steam visible.

It was unknown as to where the Black Goat had wandered off to, or what it was currently eating.

Her gaze went across the steam and fell upon the dividing wall beyond the autumn woods.

That wall belonged to Orthodox Academy.

Chen Chang Sheng wasn't in the library; he was in his own room in the small dorm. He was sat beside the window, a book in one hand, with the other hanging outside the window, receiving Starlight descending from the night sky.

The Archbishop's declaration had roused a hail of gossip within the Capital, this hail became a storm and traversed the walls of Orthodox Academy; no matter how he tried to ignore what was

happening beyond the windows, the sounds of the storm was too fierce and couldn't be blocked out of his ears. His current mood was thusly, rather sombre; he didn't know what intentions the Archbishop had, he didn't know how the Archbishop came to know of his need to achieve first place upon the First Banner, and he equally didn't know what meaning was there to him participating in the Grand Examination when he couldn't achieve Purification.

The Starlight landed upon his palm; his meridians were clear, yet there were no changes.

He could clearly sense the position of his star within the deepest reaches of the night sky, that fleeting connection gradually calmed him down again.

The book he had in his hand was the Four Classics of Meditation, he had spent the last few days researching the various principles behind the Meditation Realm, to help prepare for Luo Luo and Tang Thirty-Six's life-and-death endeavour to break through into the Ethereal Opening Realm. He didn't let up on his own cultivation however, spending countless nights guiding Starlight for Purification, alas, his body didn't undergo any changes, leading to him feeling tired and despaired.

Yet, at this moment, within the Four Classics of Meditation, he saw a passage that made him think of a certain possibility.

His five fingers were slightly outstretched and the Starlight fell through the gaps, landing upon the window screen.

Chapter 118 – The Starlight Between My Fingers (2)

By using some strength in your fingers and clasping them together, you can grasp objects, but some things cannot be grasped, say the wind, say rays of light, say time itself.

Chen Chang Sheng spread his fingers, and Starlight seeped through.

From Spring to deep-autumn, for countless nights, the Starlight that had descended upon his body, could it have been seeping through just like this?

The starting point of cultivation was to illuminate your Fated Star and then to guide Starlight for Purification; after countless years, countless cultivators had gone through this process, the brilliance that descended from a Fated Star, quietly transformed the cultivator's body; starting from your skin, hair, nails, all the way to your bones, flesh and inner organs; never had there been records of Starlight passing straight through the cultivator's body.

A cultivator's body is not made of glass; neither is it made of water.

Chen Chang Sheng was well-read in the Scripture of The Way, yet hadn't seen any similar precedents mentioned. Within the addendum of the Four Classics of Meditation however, he noticed a single passage, that passage noted a medical case study: 100 years ago, a Southerner died after mysteriously exploding; upon

investigation by the local officials and sects, no cause of death could be found, they only noted that the victim had attempted and failed at completing Purification for 13 years in succession.

He had practised medicine under Taoist Ji since he was a child and thus focused upon this medical case study's additional details; he noticed that the author also mentioned the victim suffered from an illness known as Lou Beng (Leakage Failure) disease.

The disease known as Leakage Failure was caused by an in-born deficiency in blood and qi, causing weakness; what did this have to do with exploding?

Chen Chang Sheng speculated on this passage, this bizarre case study, and upon comparing it with his own body's situation, he came up with a daring and preposterous hypothesis.

The Southerner who had died from exploding, had the Leakage Failure disease, this was actually just someone who was born with an unusual constitution; as he guided Starlight to Purify, the descending Starlight did not transform his skin or hair, but had shone past his skin and directly entered the deepest reaches of his body.

That person had attempted Purification for 13 years, it could be surmised that a large quantity of Star Brilliance had accumulated within his body and that due to some reason; a reason Chen Chang Sheng could already faintly see an inkling of, the accumulated Star Brilliance had suddenly erupted.

This hypothesis had some points that made it difficult to believe: how can Starlight go past the skin? But upon closer consideration, whilst cultivating, a roof or clothing could do nothing to hinder the connection between the cultivator and their Fated Star, and couldn't obstruct Starlight, therefore; on what basis could it be concluded that Starlight couldn't go past the skin and directly enter the body?

Not to mention, if this was an impossibility, then why would the Orthodoxy's virtuous forebears, from hundreds of years past, had gone through the trouble of carefully noting down this medical case study within the addendum of the Four Classics of Meditation?

Chen Chang Sheng dared to make such a hypothesis because he had encountered a lot of difficult questions on his path to cultivation. The fact that he could illuminate his Fated Star, was proof of his divine sense being suitably vast and powerful; logic would dictate that his cultivation should be successful, yet who could have predicted that it would instead stall at the stage of Purification and continue to do so for half a year.

Even if it was due to his meridian lines being different, which made it impossible to Purify in the same way others do, where did all the Starlight go to? Did it just dissipate without a trace?

No, this was something he couldn't possibly believe. Having spent so many nights doing this, he had long started to suspect something; this was unreasonable. If it could be said that Heaven's Way rewarded diligence, then who could compare with his diligence? Though of course, if Heaven's Way was unfair, then he

had nothing else he could say, but at this moment in time, he still held onto the view that out of the process of guiding Starlight to undergo Purification, he had fulfilled the requirement of guiding Starlight.

Yet, even an expert such as Jin Yu Lu, couldn't sense any traces of True Essence from within his body, if the Starlight was really contained within his body, then where would it be? How was he to find its location and then make use of it?

Just as how one would seek their Fated Star, if you wanted to inquire the state your own body, you are your own best observer.

Chen Chang Sheng was aware of the method.

That method was Meditation.

Cultivation required the illumination of a Fated Star, then Purification, then meditative introspection. This sequence was immutable; any transpositions would cause either injury or death without exception. Countless years ago, there were cultivators that attempted to forge new methods, but now, no one dared to try such a reckless endeavour.

Human cultivators, in terms of their bodily strength, was the weakest out of the three races of demon, yao and human. To directly attempt meditative introspection without first successfully achieving Purification; ignoring the criteria of ensuring your meridians were wide enough and strong enough to endure the movement of True Essence converted from Starlight, was akin to

seeking death itself.

Akin to an embankment that had yet to be reinforced; you seek to irrigate it using sea water?

Daring to allow the power of True Essence to wantonly flow through the body, to seek new grounds and establish a base without the thorough strengthening of every bone, every fibre of hair in your body through Purification?

For meditative introspection, completing Purification was the most basic requirement, Chen Chang Sheng was not a member of the yao race, thus he had to adhere to this rule. If he were to attempt skipping the Purification stage, then, according to the Scripture of The Way, even if he was to find the Star Brilliance that was hidden in his body through meditative introspection; upon the moment of contact, he was likely to instantly perish.

If his hypothesis was correct, then the Southerner that had died due to an explosion, recorded in the addendum of the Four Classics of Meditation, had clearly managed to accidentally die in this fashion.

But if he were not to perform meditative introspection, he wouldn't be able to find the Star Brilliance that he suspected to be hidden within his body, and he would forever stall upon the entrance of the Purification realm, without being able to advance further; was this not a hopeless situation?

This was a question of his life with only two choices.

Even someone who held time to be as precious as he did, could only contemplate upon this matter for a time, wracked with indecision in weighing its advantages and disadvantages.

The Grand Examination was fast approaching; the amount of time he had left was very short indeed.

Heaven's Way, or rather, fate, really was unfair.

His fate really was dismal; not only did he have a difficult to treat illness, but it seems he also had an exceptionally unusual problem in cultivation.

He was becoming very depressed, yet at this moment, he heard Xuan Yuan Po calling everyone for supper.

Due to health concerns, he rarely had supper, this made him even more depressed.

Not wanting to see the others, he left the dorm; pushing open the new door on the wall, he arrived at the Hundred Herb Garden.

The autumn trees gently swayed within the night breeze; from far away a dim light could be seen.

What was it? He was still filled with indecision, and naturally started thinking of the Black Dragon that was under the Imperial

Palace alongside the words he had said in front of that Black Dragon.

It would seem if he wanted to continue living, he would have to risk his life.

He then remembered, he had promised to see the Black Dragon but never had the chance to fulfil that promise.

Upon this moment, he saw a figure of eerie darkness, a divine-like existence.

This wasn't the Black Dragon.

It was the Black Goat.

Chen Chang Sheng was surprised; he went to the Black Goat and crouched down in front of it, asking: "Why are you here?"

Chapter 119 – Riddle

The Black Goat calmly looked at Chen Chang Sheng, before suddenly lowering its head and lightly tapping his forehead.

Chen Chang Sheng misunderstood its meaning and started searching himself for anything edible, but found nothing, upon lifting his head, he saw that a tree to his right had some fire loquats; seeing that they were ripe, he silently motioned some gestures towards the Black Goat and tiptoed to pick them, before handing them towards the Black Goat's head.

The Black Goat lightly tilted its head, continuing to quietly observe him. This made him feel slightly uncomfortable; he couldn't help feeling that the gaze was laughing at him, causing him to feel slightly helpless, upon this moment, the Black Goat lowered its head, took the fire loquat and slowly began eating.

Chen Chang Sheng let out a breath of relief; feeling as if he had managed to complete some sort of monumental task.

After the Black Goat finished its chewing, it nudged Chen Chang Sheng's knee, before moving towards the woods. Previously, at the Imperial Palace, it had used this same method to lead the way for Chen Chang Sheng, thus, he followed the Black Goat, thinking to himself, "Where does the goat want to take me?" while thinking this, he saw light from within the woods.

It was that stone table; an oil lamp; a pot of tea; two tea cups and the middle-aged woman that couldn't speak.

Chen Chang Sheng greeted the middle-aged woman, his expression was calm, but he felt nervous; he knew that the Black Goat had a special status within the Zhou Dynasty's Imperial Palace; according to rumours, only Mo Yu could approach it, for the Black Goat to accompany this middle-aged woman tonight to the Hundred Herb Garden; who was she?

He had initially thought that the middle-aged woman was a Lady Official of the Imperial Palace, maybe even the Principal Lady Official, but now it seemed possible that she ranked even higher.

He thought of a different possibility but immediately denied it, this was because everyone knew that that Saintly Countenance had a charm that could dazzle the world, and was the continent's most famous beauty during the reign of Emperor Taizong. If she really were to be that Saintly Countenance, why would she intentionally change her appearance and come looking for a nobody like himself?

Upon realising that the person approaching was Chen Chang Sheng, the middle-aged woman did not reveal any sign of surprise, she only looked at the Black Goat with a faintly twitching brow, akin to reprimanding it for bringing him here.

Tapping noises could be heard, as the woman used her finger to gently rap upon the stone table.

Chen Chang Sheng sat down, raised the tea pot and filled in the two tea cups, before respectfully passing one of them towards the

woman.

The woman held the tea cup between two fingers, akin to someone pinching a stone by the riverside, and brought it to her lips, gently sipping.

Chen Chang Sheng used two hands to raise his cup, akin to clasping a Luminous Pearl, and brought it to his lips, gently puffing at the hot tea.

The woman looked at his actions and gave out a silent laugh, an expression that felt indescribably free and natural, it seemed like she was laughing at him being overly careful.

“It’s too hot, there’s no other reason behind it.”

Chen Chang Sheng explained, while being slightly embarrassed. He then remembered that she couldn’t speak and seemed to also have problems with hearing; he placed his teacup on the table and did a few gestures with his hands.

After that, came the tea drinking.

The same as that first time they met each other in the Hundred Herb Garden, the middle-aged woman and youth didn’t converse with each other and only sat down drinking tea; their gazes rarely landing upon each other.

Chen Chang Sheng was used to this kind of atmosphere,

reminding him of his Senior; he did not know how his Senior was doing back at the Old Temple in Xi Ning village, nor when would he be willing to travel to the Capital.

What he also didn't know, was that Mo Yu had sent people to Xi Ning village and found the Old Temple vacant; Taoist Ji and his Senior Yu Ren had disappeared to some unknown location.

Chen Chang Sheng's gaze fell upon the middle-aged woman for a moment.

He had wanted to enter the Imperial Palace in order to see the Black Dragon, but couldn't find a route, he couldn't rely upon the Black Goat for this... having guessed that this middle-aged woman had a high position within the Imperial Palace, he had the sudden urge to ask her how could he stealthily enter the palace and whether if she had ever heard of a Black Dragon.

No matter how you looked at it, doing this would be akin to seeking death; asking a mysterious aristocrat from the Imperial Palace as to how could one stealthily enter the palace alongside probing for information on something as restricted and classified as the Black Dragon, apart from seeking death, what else could it be?

But for some unknown reason, he felt that they would be willing to tell him what he wanted and wouldn't harm him.

Having grown up alongside his Senior Yu Ren, he had always felt that deaf and mute people were all kind and gentle. Looking at this

middle-aged woman made it easy to conjure up memories of his Senior; it felt intimate, trustworthy, just like the first impression he gave others. Not to mention, on that night, when she had extended her hands to gently stroke his face, it reminded him of someone he had long forgotten, or more specifically, an existence he hadn't thought of for a long time.

He was an orphan, those two people, or perhaps their existence, had never existed in his life, therefore it was hard to conceptualise and easily led to him not thinking about them for a long time.

The hot tea within the tea pot was endless, and the steam rising from the tea cups were never to dissipate, only the night breeze could scatter it, making the vapour drift slightly.

Chen Chang Sheng's hands gestured rapidly in front of him, expressing his intent.

The woman looked at his actions with an expressionless face, the previously calm atmosphere being replaced by an icy chill. It was obvious that she wasn't pleased with Chen Chang Sheng's question.

Upon Chen Chang Sheng finishing his questioning on the Black Dragon, she raised her right hand and used three fingers to gesture in the night wind.

The motions of her fingers were like the breeze and hard to fathom; if it were not for Chen Chang Sheng's keen eyesight and concentration, he wouldn't have been able to see them clearly, let

alone understand its meaning.

Though, understanding her message wasn't necessarily a good thing.

She was asking Chen Chang Sheng: "Aren't you afraid of death?"

Chen Chang Sheng gestured in reply: he didn't want to die, but a promise is important. He was also on the verge of facing a problematic situation, if it wasn't handled correctly, he would likely never have a chance to enter the palace again and will never meet the Black Dragon, therefore, he could only risk asking her.

The autumn woods were ethereally frigid, the woman quietly looked at him for a long time, before suddenly letting out a silent laugh and gesturing: "It seems like you really don't fear death."

The first reply of "Aren't you afraid of death?" was an expression of her displeasure and an intimidation, this current reply was her appraisal of him.

This was also what she admired the most about him.

The woman dipped her hand into the tea cup and wrote a single word upon the table, before rising and leaving for the Imperial Palace.

The Black Goat had emerged from some unknown place and followed behind her, it turned and gave Chen Chang Sheng a single

glance.

Chen Chang Sheng wanted to do the same thing he did last time, and escort her to the entrance of the secret passage at the Imperial Palace wall, but fearing that the word on the table would disappear, he could only stay behind.

The tea was black tea, and was deeply red in colour, etched upon the grey stone table, it was very vivid.

It was a single word: “Ice”.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't quite understand and raised his head, he could still see the fading image of the middle-aged woman and the Black Goat.

He couldn't converse with the middle-aged woman, they could only use sign language, but this word... was a riddle.

Chapter 120 – New North Bridge

The night breeze traversed the woods, cooling the face as it brushed past; he stirred from his stupor, realising the incredible risk he took in conferring with the middle-aged woman on the matter of the Black Dragon. Upon that moment, faint sounds of fury from Xuan Yuan Po came drifting in from across the woods. It was probably due to Tang Thirty-Six stealing the supper that was supposed to be for him. He laughed while shaking his head; let go of the question in his mind and headed back towards the academy.

The word “Ice” that the middle-aged woman left upon the stone table was Chen Chang Sheng’s only clue towards the Black Dragon, it also seemed to be a trial of sorts; the Black Dragon was a Mighty Black Frost Dragon, itself, was related to ice and snow.

The problem was, ice is something rather common, especially in this season, with Autumn turning to Winter, the rivers and channels that were leveed would occasionally show signs of ice; while the more Northerly areas probably had rivers that had already frozen over into vast plains of ice. Even in the midst of Summer, the aristocracy and elite would have had ice stored within icehouses on their estates.

Additionally, for those who walked the path of ice for their cultivation, ice was also something commonly seen; just by preparing a pail of water and extending one’s hand inside, they could have created a pail of ice. At a place like Li Palace, they even had special arrays for the continuous creation of ice for the personal use of the Pope and other high ranking clergy.

This was a problem Chen Chang Sheng came across... ice was just too common in the Capital.

Back at Xi Ning village, in winter, he would often go with his Senior to the streams in the mountains, collecting ice to play with, here at the Capital, his contact with ice had actually decreased. Thinking back, the most memorable contact he had with ice was when he accompanied Luo Luo outside the academy for shopping, they had bought ice poles to eat.

He remembered very clearly that it was in the midst of Summer, the streets were brimming with people and no matter who they were, be they ladies, gentlemen, retainers or peddlers, almost everyone had an ice pole in hand. In contrast, at Xi Ning village or from records in the Scripture of The Way on Summers in other cities, this was something relatively rare.

Be it cultivators or special arrays, both could easily produce ice, but couldn't possibly make ice a low-cost product. Even if the cultivators were to ignore their standing and all arrays were to be held at maximum output, it wouldn't be enough to supply the entire Capital for the duration of Summer.

He left Orthodox Academy and went to the convenience store that was located near the well at the entrance to Hundred Blossom Lane; he asked about the scene he saw during Summer and where the source for the ice poles was. This trail led him to a confectionary store named Xin Chao Fang (New Trends Plaza/Square), which subsequently led him to a government owned icehouse that was under strict supervision.

According to his investigation results, in the summer-time, all the Capital's confectionary stores sourced their ice poles from this icehouse.

The icehouse was located in the western district alleys; with its relatively small door, who could have guessed that its icehouse beneath was large enough to store such vast quantities of ice?

Chen Chang Sheng had Tang Thirty-Six make a trip, discovering that the icehouse located at the western district alleys did not contain an array, and upon further investigation, it was actually a natural icehouse and apparently relied upon a frost vein beneath the Capital for its endless supply of ice.

He then found a way to usher Tang Thirty-Six back to the academy and found a simple food store in the western district alleys for somewhere to sit; taking out a pen and paper and started earnestly plotting out the surrounding area.

He naturally didn't believe in the frost vein explanation. Using knowledge from the Classic of Water, governmental regulations, and findings by Tang Thirty-Six on the icehouse's layout, he used half an hour's time to estimate the location of the icehouse's cellar, ascertaining whether if that location had an underground stream and most importantly... the source of the frost.

Heading out of the western district alleys, he headed for the line he had plotted out.

After an unknown length of time, he discovered that the bustling

noise around him had disappeared, he raised his head in surprise, but could only see a towering wall before his eyes; he had actually arrived before the Imperial Palace.

It was the Imperial Palace after all.

Seeing the barely visible cornices of the palace walls, and distinguishing between the various buildings; using Orthodox Academy's position as a reference, he roughly determined the positioning of Wei Yang Palace, he then closed his eyes. He imagined himself walking, like that night of the Ivy League gathering; reaching the derelict garden, entering the frost pond, he started running, running ahead and finally pushing open those doors.

He opened his eyes and turned onto a small path behind him on the left, stepping upon a floor that was covered in golden leaves to reach his targeted destination.

The Golden Autumn before the Palace was like the Green Ivies of Li Palace, a well-known attraction, it was currently the best time for seeing this attraction, not to mention almost its last time; though the weather was rather cold, tourists were still numerous.

He carefully avoided the muddied hands of a small child, respectfully let an elder pass by, before crossing several trees to arrive at a well.

He knew that the name of this place was New North Bridge, but this was the first he knew of the well located here.

He leaned over to investigate the well and found that he couldn't detect its bottom, yet it lacked any moisture, indicating that it was probably an abandoned well.

He raised his head and gave a glance towards the towering autumn skies, looked at the gathered tourists who were nearby and began to feel awed, conflicted.

That Black Dragon was actually confined under here? The entrance was actually in plain sight?

New North Bridge wasn't actually a bridge; it was a location.

So why was this place called New North Bridge, even though there was no bridge?

In regards to this, the Capital had a famous legend.

It was said that many years ago, when the allied forces of humans and yao had a bloody battle upon the central plains against the demon race, a powerful evil dragon took the opportunity to pillage and destroy, coming to the Capital to cause chaos. Wantonly slaughtering innocent people, it was unstoppable; upon the Capital being embroiled in disaster, unexpected by all, Wang Zhi Ce secretly returned from the front lines and took the divine troops stationed at the Capital to defeat the evil dragon.

The evil dragon was a member of the dragon tribe and was one of

the most sacred, divine things in existence, wanting to completely destroy one was an extremely difficult task, it was also rumoured that the evil dragon had the blood of the Dragon King running in its veins. Thus, even a legendary figure such as Wang Zhi Ce was afraid of the possibility that killing the evil dragon would provoke the dragon tribe that had long been reclusive, or that the evil dragon would put up a last stand that could bring even greater disaster upon the Capital. This caused him to decide to give the dragon an alternative: Wang Zhi Ce entreated the dragon to accept humanity's imprisonment as punishment, promising that they would construct a new bridge above the prison and that once the bridge had turned old or was submerged by the River Luo, the dragon would be released.

Dragons had an unimaginably long lifespan, the evil dragon thought to itself, a new bridge turning old is only a matter of tens or hundreds of years, it also had a deep knowledge of the water patterns around the Capital due to its inborn talent and was certain that Luo Shui would flood once every 60 years; coupled with its injuries at the time, that placed it on the verge of death, it agreed to the conditions.

The evil dragon surrendered and the Zhou Dynasty laid down powerful restrictions outside of the Imperial Palace, imprisoning the dragon beneath the ground, yet... didn't construct a bridge on the surface.

Luo Shui traversed the entire Imperial Capital, but didn't cross this location, the so-called bridge was naught but a fake bridge.

Wang Zhi Ce also did one more thing, he named this location:

New North Bridge.

This bridge, would never be submerged by the River Luo.

This bridge, would forever be new.

The evil dragon, was destined to never leave.

Chen Chang Sheng sat down by a tree, his eyes rested upon a scroll, but he couldn't bring himself to read further.

Behind the tree, a father was telling his child this legend.

The father was singing praises for Immortal Wang's endless legacies while the child clapped in joy. A child asked, "Isn't that evil dragon currently in the ground beneath our feet then?" The other children present, upon hearing those words, became afraid; the adults all laughed uproariously, stating that stories are just stories in the end and shouldn't be taken seriously.

Chen Chang Sheng had also heard of this legend, but had never thought that it would be true.

He looked at the abandoned well that was not far off and his mood became increasingly mixed.

Those who had heard of the legend of New North Bridge would abhor the violence of the evil dragon and praise Wang Zhi Ce's

wisdom; but he felt that the evil dragon was pitiful.

Of course, there was the chance that the legend was true and the dragon had killed countless innocents, leading to the trickery of Wang Zhi Ce. Having these kinds of feelings caused him to feel unsteady, he had after all, seen the current pitiful state of the dragon and upon comparing the beautiful autumn scene before him with the cold and frosty cavern beneath the ground, he couldn't help feeling sympathy.

During the daytime, New North Bridge had a lot of people, far off beneath the palace walls there were palace guards patrolling, while atop of the palace walls, Imperial flying carriages would also land once in a while; occasionally, you could also see wisps of flame, they were probably from Xue Xing Chuan's Fire Cloud Unicorn. He knew that there wasn't a chance to enter the underground and that he had to wait for a suitable opportunity.

He lowered his head and continued to read.

Leaves left its perch and landed upon his side, the yellow glimmer was akin to that of a leaf made of gold.

After an unknown period of time, the surroundings gradually quietened down, twilight also receded and night arrived. He raised his head and checked his surroundings to make sure no one was paying any attention to his direction and moved towards the abandoned well.

He knew that he couldn't show any hesitation, otherwise he

would attract the attention of others.

Thus, he directly dropped his body; the gold-like leaf rose up, and then fell, landing outside of the well's rim.

The abandoned well was bottomless, and naturally did not contain any silt, akin to entering nothingness. There was not a single ray of light here, only darkness, Chen Chang Sheng plummeted down the darkness increasingly fast. When he jumped down the well, he had placed his arms around his head; his Master and Senior had used medicinal decoctions and cudgels to toughen his body from when he was a child, thus he ensured he wouldn't receive any injury from bumping into the walls of the well in his descent.

After entering this darkness from the bottom of the well, the wind whistled past his face, he didn't worry about falling to his death, because he knew that the Black Dragon would definitely notice his arrival. Not to mention, inexplicably, the closer he got to the Black Dragon, the closer his emotions got to being the same as that on the night of the Ivy League gathering; fearing nothing, not even death itself.

He was still in mid-air as he heard that long, drawn-out breathing, before hearing it slowly stopping.

From within the darkness appeared two ethereal spheres of divine flame, these were its eyes.

The Black Dragon awakened.

A dense and seemingly physical, air cushion appeared below Chen Chang Sheng, aiding him in landing upon the ground.

A mountainous figure, horrifyingly and slowly moved towards him; the vast underground space's air, due to the pressure, let out dreadful sounds of splintering.

An unimaginable sense of chill, surrounded his entire body within a moment, his eyelashes immediately froze over with frost that could drift off at any moment.

"It's me." He took out the Luminous Pearl and used it to illuminate his face.

Upon him bringing out the Luminous Pearl, the thousands of Luminous Pearls that lined the upper reaches of this dark, underground space, also lit up.

That Black Dragon had once again appeared before him, that dragon body was like mountain valleys, endlessly stretching away. The dragon head was like a palace, with dragon scales like mirrors that had frost set in-between, while the surface was coated with dust; an unspeakable mourning; gently undulating dragon whiskers, akin to lightning given physical and enduring form.

This was Chen Chang Sheng's second time seeing the Black Dragon's actual visage, yet it was still astonishing, he took some time to gather his senses.

He put away the Luminous Pearl and greeted the Black Dragon, upon thinking of the Black Dragon's age, he conducted himself as a someone from a younger generation, "Mister Dragon, I've come to see you."

Seeing that Chen Chang Sheng had actually come, the divine flame burning within the Black Dragon's eyes flickered incessantly, akin to dancing, appearing to show unbridled joy, but upon hearing his address, the two spheres of divine flame immediately froze and became chillingly frosty.

That fearsome Dragon Might, once again appeared within the underground space.

Chen Chang Sheng suffered immensely, and quickly raised his right hand, saying: "I understand."

The Dragon Might lessened, the Black Dragon looked at him indifferently, waiting for him to redo his greeting.

Chen Chang Sheng thought it through, "Mister" must have been too plain, and judging from the lifespan of dragons, even if this Black Dragon had been imprisoned here for hundreds of years, it might still be a juvenile or at most a youth; not to mention it was probably like the married women of Xi Ning village who did not like being called auntie and preferred to be called "sister"...

He once again bowed and formally greeted the Black Dragon, affectionately saying: "Long time no see, Brother Dragon."

A snap was heard as the Black Dragon released its Dragon Might in full, terrifying force, Chen Chang Sheng immediately fell to the ground, raising a shower of ice.

The Black Dragon slowly flew up above him, its whiskers dancing in the air, akin to tentacles creeping out from some abyss, it was clearly incensed.

Chen Chang Sheng laid down on the floor and struggled to raise his right hand, saying: “Venerable Elder, Venerable Elder, please calm yourself.”

Venerable Elder wasn't fully suitable either, but the Black Dragon begrudgingly accepted it; Chen Chang Sheng sat within the ruined snow, having trouble dissipating the fear he felt from remembering what just happened, thinking to himself, if he had only managed to squawk out some sounds, would he have been instantly frozen into ice shards by that fearsome Dragon Breath?

According to that night's promise, Chen Chang Sheng had to visit the Black Dragon and converse with it, but at this moment, both human and dragon, were sat opposite each other wordlessly. The atmosphere was tense and a little embarrassing; the Black Dragon understood human speech, while Chen Chang Sheng knew of some phonemes from the dragon language but didn't know dragon speech, how could they converse?

Suddenly, Chen Chang Sheng thought of how he previously jumped into the abandoned well at New North Bridge; he pointed

at the barely visible black dot on top of the dome ceiling above and asked: “Has it always been like this? In these countless years, there must have been a lot of people who have accidentally fallen into the well, did they die? Or were they saved by you? If they were saved, then where did they go?”

This was the most important question for him right now, though he felt some pity for the Black Dragon after hearing that legend, and was grateful for it previously allowing him to leave this place alive; if... people who had fallen into the well ultimately became its food, he would definitely be unable to continue sitting here.

He didn't fear being eaten by the Black Dragon; but couldn't accept conversing with a man-eating Black Dragon.

Chapter 121 – The Dragon’s Dilemma

The Black Dragon indifferently gave him a glance, it didn’t contain any emotion, or more specifically it was rather simplistic. But it was the same as the dragon speech it used; this simplicity contained a complex message. Chen Chang Sheng only met the dragon’s gaze for a moment, but it felt as if he had seen innumerable stars and had received a large amount of information the dragon had wanted to convey.

The abandoned well’s creation was personally overseen by Wang Zhi Ce and was the Life Gate of the array that formed the prison for the Black Dragon, just akin to how the Black Dragon Pond that was located within the derelict garden was the Life Gate of Tong Palace.

The bottom of the well originally had a net that was woven from three strands of a special alloy, which served the function of keeping the array’s Life Gate functional, and ensuring that citizens of the Capital did not accidentally fall into the well and end up becoming food for the dragon. Not long ago however – Chen Chang Sheng couldn’t make out how long this “not long ago” actually was, it could have been decades ago or maybe just days – from the Imperial Palace, someone retrieved the three strands of alloyed net for some unknown reason.

The Black Dragon had only used a single detached glance to transmit this information straight into Chen Chang Sheng’s mind, he understood most of it, but there were still parts he hadn’t yet had the chance or time to fully process, he didn’t fully understand its meaning, but he did clearly manage to perceive what the dragon wanted to project: humans are really inane.

A being that had been imprisoned for hundreds of years, without being able to communicate and had to endure days of solitude and cold, actually called humans inane. Chen Chang Sheng couldn't quite accept this, thinking to himself, "If you weren't bored, why were you so insistent on keeping me here and had to make me promise to come back and talk to you?" The bigger question was why did someone come to take away the three strands of alloyed net, weren't they afraid of people falling in?

He looked towards the two metal chains behind the Black Dragon, the gaze travelled a long distance before resting upon the gigantic portrayals of those two legendary Divine Generals that were on the stone wall, questions filled his mind.

He had never thought of assisting the Black Dragon in leaving this place. Firstly, he was unsure as to how much of the legend was actually factual; if the dragon was to leave this underground cavern, would it bring death and destruction to the Capital? More importantly, the array that was used to imprison the Black Dragon was created by Wang Zhi Ce and other peak experts during Taizong's era, with his current level of ability, even the thought of attempting to breach it was preposterous.

He suddenly thought of something, since the Black Dragon understood human speech and he could directly receive messages from its gaze, there wasn't any problem in their ability to communicate. Incidentally, experts who had reached the realm of Star Fusion and above could rapidly communicate using just their divine sense, therefore, there wasn't any reason why a divine existence on the level of the Might Black Frost Dragons would have been any different.

Chen Chang Sheng looked towards the Black Dragon, wishing to inform it of this, but the Black Dragon, akin to having already guessed what he was thinking, quickly closed its eyes, scattering a spray of ice shards. Chen Chang Sheng was stunned by its response, he guessed that the Black Dragon did not only wish to converse; did it want to hear speech from its own species? For what reason? A yearning?

“That night, I had promised to come see you as quickly as I can... but the Imperial Palace is hard to enter and even getting in once is difficult, requiring enormous risk, you know that I’m afraid of dying. But I’m on the verge of something problematic, that if handled badly, I will probably die, therefore I decided I should come see you before it happens.”

He didn’t mention the word left behind by the middle-aged woman, nor did he mention the effort he had expended in order to meet the dragon.

“That night when I first met you, I said a lot of things concerning death, to repeat that today; I hope it doesn’t annoy you.”

Upon finishing his words, he suddenly thought of something; the dragon tribe had an innate understanding of the power behind the heavens, earth and stars. With its knowledge, it should have an understanding of this area; he suddenly had a surge in hope and disclosed the problem he had met in his cultivation path, before earnestly waiting for the dragon to open its eyes.

After a long period of inactivity, the Black Dragon slowly opened its eyes, frost rippled down.

It looked at Chen Chang Sheng, its gaze was still indifferent, but Chen Chang Sheng detected a trace of change; this change was bewilderment and doubt, indecision.

Within the dragon tribe's three most noble and powerful bloodlines, the Mighty Black Frost Dragons were noted for their knowledge and wisdom. For even the dragon to be unable to solve his problem led to Chen Chang Sheng feeling even more pessimistic.

Upon this moment, the Black Dragon's whiskers fluttered upwards towards his body, before striking out and touching him upon the centre of his brow, bringing him back to his senses.

This action, was evidence of the dragon getting impatient.

What did a human youth's cultivation have to do with itself? It was only interested in how to make him grasp dragon speech so that he may perform another task.

Chen Chang Sheng forlornly shook his head, feeling rather sombre; back in Xi Ning village when he read about the dragon tribe and their pride, tyranny and dreadfulness in the Scripture of The Way, who would have thought that he would actually meet a real dragon, and that the dragon would be one that enjoyed instructing others.

A brief moment later.

“Aooo.....”

Chen Chang Sheng let out a sound that was akin to a low growl, akin to the wind, but unlike any normal sound that can be pronounced. This sound was very simplistic, yet also complex, requiring the usage of many smaller muscles within the throat and exertion of mental control over several uncontrollable areas before it could be produced, yet it did not require any usage of the tongue.

This was the first word the Black Dragon had taught him that night; he had learnt to pronounce similar sounds when he was younger, back at the old temple in Xi Ning village, therefore he quickly managed to grasp and remember it. The meaning of this word was very complex; using human language as a comparison, it contained at least tens of messages, with the most complex requiring an entire paragraph to represent, but the most simplistic message was simply: “me.”

The Black Dragon was pleased with Chen Chang Sheng’s performance, its dragon whiskers quivered; delighting in its own ability to educate others. Unknown when, from the domed ceiling above, two Luminous Pearls had been taken down and was grasped within the dragon’s front claw, spinning in shades of eerie green. Were the Luminous Pearls any bigger, or the dragon’s claw any smaller, the image would have been even more akin to that of an old teacher in some village, teaching private classes.

The dragon lightly turned its eyes to stare at the Luminous Pearl by Chen Chang Sheng’s side.

Chen Chang Sheng could clearly remember that the greedy Black Dragon had wanted to forcibly keep his Luminous Pearl; he quickly put away the pearl.

The Black Dragon's whiskers gently wilted, evidently disappointed; it then let out a single sound.

This was the second word it wanted to teach Chen Chang Sheng.

Luminous Pearl, glass, rainbow, golden scales upon a lake, blazing night clouds, or more specifically... brilliance.

Chen Chang Sheng let out an embarrassed laugh and rubbed his brow, this raised his attention slightly, before trying to copy the sound enunciated by the Black Dragon.

The most important thing was time. The Grand Examination was imminent, with his Purification problem unsolved and the risk of death approaching, time was currently the most precious thing to Chen Chang Sheng. Logically, he shouldn't be wasting it here on learning dragon speech, it should be acknowledged that this was as meaningless as learning dragon slaying skills.

But he didn't refuse the Black Dragon's demand, nor did he leave, instead, he continued to earnestly learn. This was because he enjoyed learning, and he had already made a promise; his own matters had to be dealt with himself, promises had to be kept, even unto death. This was something he had nurtured since he was young, it wasn't something particularly good, but it was strong.

The isolated unground space might have been illuminated by countless Luminous Pearls, but it was still cold and lonely, boundlessly hollow.

On the ground, in front of the colossal Black Dragon, Chen Chang Sheng was akin to an ant.

He was like a babe, gurgling as he learnt speech.

Within the hollow underground space, strange sounds constantly rose; these were from his mispronunciations.

These were followed by echoes of the Black Dragon's chuckling.

Chapter 122 – I Really Want To Live For Another 500 Years

A long period of time passed; Chen Chang Sheng estimated the time to be now early in the morning, thus, he raised his body and expressed to the Black Dragon that the lessons for tonight should come to an end.

The Black Dragon was clearly unhappy, but graciously allowed him to leave.

He raised his head to look at the underground cavern's arched ceiling; looking at the bottom of the abandoned well from his location, all that could be seen was a small black dot that didn't let in any of the morning light.

How was he going to get back up?

Upon remembering the process used to leave this place last time, his expression changed; he started taking off his clothing as quickly as he could, before stowing them away. In his concentration, he failed to notice that while he was doing all this, the Black Dragon had an evident look of nervousness and revulsion in its eyes.

A bright flash of light went by and Chen Chang Sheng's body disappeared from the ground.

The Black Dragon looked at the ground, its whiskers fluttering

gently; this wasn't a farewell, but a gesture, expressing that he should quickly come back again.

At the next moment, Chen Chang Sheng returned to solid ground once more.

It was that sub palace within the Imperial Palace and that same pond.

He left the pond and reached the edge, after checking to make sure there was no one around, he quickly took out his clothing and got dressed.

The early morning was bright, but Autumn is cold; a breeze came in from the side of the palace and within a short while, made it chokingly cold. Even with many years of taking medicinal decoctions to reinforce his muscles and bone, it was too much to bear.

Which path should he take next?

He hugged himself with his arms, and started recalling the route he took that night, suddenly, he saw the Black Goat at the opposite end of the pond.

This surprised him; he slowly let go of his arms – every time he had trouble knowing where to go, the Black Goat would show up. The middle-aged woman wasn't here today, but the Black Goat still appeared. He was beginning to find this peculiar and started

feeling that there had to be some sort of secret connection behind all of this.

Yet he did not know whom to question, since asking the Black Goat would definitely not yield an answer.

He walked over to the opposite side of the pond. The Black Goat lightly nudged his knees, just as it had for the previous occasions and then started leading the way. Unknown as to if it was due to being too early in the morning or some other reason, the Imperial Palace was devoid of people this morning, even servants that should have been tasked with sweeping the grounds could not be seen; with this, one person and one goat, easily reached the palace walls.

Ivy snaked across the palace wall, between the ivy, the faint outline of an old door could be seen, on the door was a lock.

A key was hung on the Black Goat's collar.

Chen Chang Sheng took the key and unlocked the door, he then entered the quiet path and shortly arrived back at Orthodox Academy.

This wasn't the path used by the middle-aged woman, it was the one used by Mo Yu.

Chen Chang Sheng wanted to place the key back onto the Black Goat's collar, but the Black Goat leaned its head to the side,

refusing.

He considered for a while before saying a word of thanks, then stowed away the key.

The Black Goat returned to the Imperial Palace and the old door was once again closed shut.

After this incident, life seemed to be calm and peaceful. The Divine Empress' intent was conveyed by Mo Yu to all the major powers within the Capital; Orthodox Academy's entrance was still in a state of disrepair; no one dared to come looking for trouble, Jin Yu Lu had replaced the function of a front gate; with a teapot in hand and lying down upon a bamboo chair representing the gates being closed.

Chen Chang Sheng continued with what he was doing before, studiously reading and cultivating every day and making adjustments in preparation for the Grand Examination, this included perusing exam papers from the last examination. Other than that, he would take Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po to the Hundred Herb Garden across the wall in order to obtain large quantities of medicinal herbs.

Xuan Yuan Po's injury to his right arm had completely healed and Chen Chang Sheng found a suitable skill for him to practise, it was just unknown as to how much could he improve by, by the time of the Grand Examination.

As the most favoured young master of the Wen Shui Tang family,

Tang Thirty-Six's participation in the Grand Examination was naturally held to be of great importance to the clan. Though the Old Master had heavily chastised him in a letter for leaving Heavenly Academy without his consent, the supplies provided for Tang were not reduced and had instead, increased. It seemed the Tang family were aware of events in the Capital and knew very well about Orthodox Academy's current situation.

Apart from this, the Education Board also provided Orthodox Academy with a lot of benefits, Minister Xin personally oversaw all the arrangements. The biggest contributor in the end, was Luo Luo; she took the medicinal herbs she was given by Chen Chang Sheng and prepared them according to instructions provided, refining them into medicinal pills, which were subsequently sent to the academy alongside a large number of other supplies.

Preparations were complete and all that was needed was seemingly to await the date of the Grand Examination, yet upon this moment, a small incident occurred.

One morning in early Winter, after Chen Chang Sheng had completed his routine of using Starlight to Purify and returned to the dorm from the library, he once again caught sight of Mo Yu. Lady Mo Yu's cascading black hair was loosely sprawled around her shoulders, but she wasn't asleep, she had her hands on her waist and was standing by the bedside with a scowl on her face; giving the appearance of someone that was intentionally looking for a quarrel.

This was an appearance Chen Chang Sheng had seen a lot of recently; every day after waking Tang Thirty-Six, he would see

something similar, this was the so-called “bed rising mood”; in other words, bad sleep.

“What’s wrong?”

Even though Orthodox Academy and Mo Yu were enemies, he was still very curious about the reason for her current appearance, he was certain that the pillow contained fresh medicinal herbs that were beneficial to resting the mind.

Mo Yu flipped up the bedding and pointed at some scattered crystals that were lying on the bed, angrily saying: “If you don’t want me to sleep here, then all you have to do is tell me, at the very least, you shouldn’t have placed these stones to spite me.”

This wasn’t the case, but from her perspective, this was Chen Chang Sheng intentionally spiting her.

Chen Chang Sheng couldn’t understand; the crystals were provided by the Wen Shui Tang family and Luo Luo, they contained the property of jade essence, when used during meditation, it could greatly raise the absorption rate of Star Brilliance, which was why he had stuffed the crystals under his bedding.

For the Grand Examination, he hadn’t left any details to chance.

“I added two layers of bedding and tried it myself, the crystals can’t be felt at all.” He explained to Mo Yu.

Mo Yu didn't say anything, thinking to herself, if he knew that Ping Guo would be able to feel a single pea under ten layers of bedding and that it would stop her from sleeping, he definitely wouldn't be able to understand.

From outside the window, snow suddenly began falling; this was the first snow.

From within the window, it suddenly turned quiet, the two of them looked at each other silently, with the atmosphere turning a little awkward.

It was at this moment that Mo Yu realised her anger was unreasonable, while Chen Chang Sheng realised he didn't have any need to proffer an explanation.

This was in his room and it was his bed, he didn't have any friendly feelings for her and they were, in fact, enemies.

Mo Yu left and didn't come to Orthodox Academy again till the Grand Examination, it seems she finally realised how ridiculous her actions were.

Yet, on the second day, Chen Chang Sheng found that his bedding and pillow had disappeared.

So this was acceptable? He lifted his sleeve and had a sniff, but couldn't detect any scent.

Why did Luo Luo and the Black Goat enjoy smelling him? Now, even someone like Lady Mo Yu was...

Chen Chang Sheng couldn't bring himself to feel any gratification, as a person with mild mysophobia, the thought of Mo Yu hugging his bedding each night to sleep was something difficult to accept.

Time passed by, the pleasure brought on by the first snow had already faded. Daily snow in the Capital was already commonplace, with the fading of Autumn and the arrival of Winter, the cold gradually deepened; the date of the Grand Examination fast approached.

Chen Chang Sheng knew that it was no longer the time for hesitation, hence, he stopped hesitating.

There were only days left till the Grand Examination, without a word to anyone, under the cover of a morning blizzard, he left the academy and travelled to New North Bridge. The gold-like leaves had been covered by the snow and the Capital's famous landmark was now something that could only be seen next year; tourists were absent and apart from the palace guards that were stationed afar or the barely visible flying carriages that were leaving trails in the skies above, nothing else could be seen here.

It wasn't that there was nothing here; from afar, there was a fur wearing palace servant, taking two snow mastiffs for a stroll.

Snow mastiffs were not canines, but were large monsters that would accompany human cultivators in battle. They were from the Black Rock Mountains situated outside of Old Snow City and were suited to the cold but unsuited to heat, he did not know how did they manage to live in the Capital.

Someone that could own snow mastiffs was obviously not a regular person; the two snow mastiffs were not white in colour, but of a light yellow. The snow was falling heavily and the yellow mastiff slowly turned white, the now white mastiff then slowly turned plump.

Before the palace walls, white snow abounded, the country was unified, and upon the ground there was a black void.

That was the well.

Chen Chang Sheng walked up to the well and gave the faraway palace servant and mastiffs a single glance; upon confirming that they hadn't noticed him, he leapt down.

On the surface, a blizzard enmeshed the skies, yet under the surface, the blizzard didn't stop, this was caused by every breath the Black Dragon took.

For some days now, Chen Chang Sheng had come to see the Black Dragon multiple times and was no longer as nervous as he was initially, with not knowing how to stand or where to even place his hands.

The Black Dragon was pleased with his understanding of dragon speech, but was very displeased with the frequency at which he was visiting; though it was a dragon, it understood the importance of the Grand Examination to humans, so it didn't request more.

The dragon whiskers lightly danced, clearing away the shattered ice and snow that were in front of Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng brought out several packages wrapped in oily paper and some novels that could be commonly found in the markets and placed them on the ground in a familiar manner.

Opening the oily paper revealed roast lamb, roast chicken, roast deer tail, brined ox tongue and a steamed double-headed fish.

“Leave the ox tongue for me.”

Upon thinking that the Black Dragon had been imprisoned for hundreds of years, lonely and pitiful, without having had food for a long time, Chen Chang Sheng brought food with him every time he came to visit.

The quantities were obviously not enough to fill the Black Dragon, but it was sufficient to ease its hunger.

At the start, the Black Dragon had turned its nose at the food, putting on the airs of: “I used to eat people at the palace without batting an eyelash”, but upon eating the food, it didn't show any sign of holding back.

“I’ve decided.”

Chen Chang Sheng had waited with extreme patience for the Black Dragon to slowly finish savouring the food before saying those words.

The Black Dragon stared at him like as if it was looking at an idiot.

After several meetings, it already knew what Chen Chang Sheng had in mind.

Lowly humans could only possess frail bodies, until they had successfully completed Purification, to enter introspective meditation was only seeking death.

Though it hadn’t studied overly diligently under its Royal Father, it fully understood such a basic concept.

In truth, Chen Chang Sheng also understood, the possibility of success was next to impossible; within the Three Thousand Scriptures of The Way, there wasn’t a single record of previous success.

But he had to commit to this, because the Grand Examination was imminent.

He had to obtain the first position upon the First Banner, only with this, could he enter the Ling Yan (Ascending Mist) Pavilion and meditate for an entire night.

Only with this, did he have the chance of touching upon a fate changing opportunity.

Only with this, did he have the possibility of living past 20 years.

Without this, there wasn't much difference between 20 years and 15 years.

That's correct, as he was going through his methodical and dull cultivation practice, he had already reached 15 years of age.

Subtracting 15 years from 20, left him with 5 years.

Subtracting 20 years from 500, would still be close to 500 years.

He wanted to bet 5 years for 500.

He really wanted to live for another 500 years.

Seeing the expression on Chen Chang Sheng's face, the Black Dragon knew that he was serious.

The Black Dragon's gaze gradually became stern, it planned upon

stopping him.

If you were to die, who would talk to me, who would help me complete that task?

Chen Chang Sheng didn't let out a single word, and only looked at the Black Dragon; it knew it couldn't stop him.

The Black Dragon's expression became slightly inflamed.

Chen Chang Sheng removed the short sword from his waist and while looking at it, he said: "If I were to die..."

The Black Dragon took one look at the short sword and immediately composed itself.

Chen Chang Sheng considered for a moment, then said: "Forget it, death is death, leaving behind last words won't serve any real purpose."

The Black Dragon's stern gaze gradually changed to calm, and finally, respect.

Any life that could calmly face and challenge death was worthy of respect.

Be they dragon, demon, yao or human; or even just a sparrow.

It remembered its Royal Father telling it those words.

Due to respect, it no longer tried to stop Chen Chang Sheng, its dragon whiskers fluttered, lightly touching him upon the brow before returning.

Chen Chang Sheng sat down and picked up the ox tongue he had reminded the Black Dragon to leave for him.

At the age of ten, upon knowing he wouldn't live past twenty, he had stopped eating unhealthy, yet delicious foods such as ox tongue.

He began to eat, seriously savouring each part with a look of satisfaction on his face.

After eating the ox tongue and drinking some water, he dusted off some snow that was on him, wiped his hands clean, and rubbed his face to raise his concentration.

Having completed all preparations, he closed his eyes and began his introspective meditation.

Chapter 123 – Blazing Plains

Similar to that night in Spring, he closed his eyes and calmed his heart, separating his thoughts and letting his divine sense leave his sea of consciousness; separating from his body, quietly drifting within the space of the underground cavern. The surroundings faintly appeared within his mind; the stone walls and light from the Luminous Pearls reappeared within his consciousness after undergoing some deviation.

Upon closing your eyes, the skies are dark, upon the skies turning dark, stars will start to appear; only through this, could one find their Fated Star, yet, his purpose this time was not to seek his Fated Star, but meditative introspection. His divine sense didn't continue rising upwards, but acted akin to snow and slowly drifted downwards, returning to his own body.

Divine sense had neither shape nor form, easily slipping pass clothing and skin, entering the innermost reaches of the body and relating back everything it comes across; this was introspection, or self-observation.

The Meditative Realm did not have a clear standard, as long as a cultivator could train their divine sense and easily enter meditative introspection, they could claim to have entered the Meditative Realm. Those who wanted to continue advancing their abilities would have to pay attention to improving the interaction between their divine sense and meridians, but the most basic requirement was self-observation.

All the methods for introspection that were given special

attention to by the major sects would have had a single line recorded alongside: “Observation of the self allows one to observe Heaven and Earth.”

Why? This was because the cultivator’s body was a Heaven and Earth. This was distinct from the real world; the world within the cultivator was microscopic, miraculous, if one were to say a cultivator’s energy source came from the natural world, then the method for increasing one’s strength would be to continuously transform their microscopic world.

Purification, this was the cultivator’s first step towards transforming their body, albeit, a rather crude method. Meditative introspection was self-observation, yet it was also a transformation of the body initiated by the cultivator, a more comprehensive transformation; upon reaching the Meditative Realm, the cultivator no longer relied upon the energy of Star Brilliance, but started practising the usage of True Essence that was converted from Star Brilliance.

Star Brilliance belonged to nature’s macroscopic Heaven and Earth, True Essence belonged to the cultivator’s microscopic Heaven and Earth.

In comparison to regular cultivators, Chen Chang Sheng’s situation was a little different; firstly, he had to search for the Star Brilliance within this microscopic Heaven and Earth, then he had to attempt transforming it into True Essence that belonged to himself. The real danger was at this point; without having completed Purification, could his body endure the explosive transformation of Star Brilliance into True Essence? Would he

suffer the same fate as the victim recorded in the Four Classics of Meditation and die from self-explosion?

He didn't ponder upon this question, and had his divine sense enter his body, beginning the self-observation, the searching.

The microscopic Heaven and Earth was still a Heaven and Earth, upon his meditative introspection, his divine sense transformed into a gust of wind within that inner world. His searching tonight, within his own body, for the Star Brilliance, was similar to the searching he had done previously for his Fated Star; it was a search over a vast Heaven and Earth; this process was a slow one, slow enough for him to forget the passage of time.

A murky vision, constantly fluctuating light sources, all came together to create countless bizarre scenes, the vagueness made this Heaven and Earth feel both familiar and unfamiliar.

There were jutting landscapes, akin to towering mountain ranges; were these the bones? Yet, what were these fragmented parts of the ground, ley lines that faintly exhibited the presence of life? Meridian channels?

The wind travelled steadily forwards within that world, his divine sense continually searched within his body, as he gradually adjusted to this sensation, the scene within his consciousness became increasingly clear. He came across fractured cliffs; granite-hard mountains had become twisted, the ley lines were broken; a scene of devastation, giving the observer a sense of desolation.

This was his own body, and it was his first time being able to see so clearly for himself, its actual state, making him feel mournful. These fractured mountain cliffs and ley lines were probably his own broken meridians? This was the shadow of death that was hidden within his own body?

Yet... the fearsome power that had twisted these mountain ranges into these misshapen forms, from where did it originate?

The wind drifted across tens of thousands of miles of wild plains and nine, all-encompassing mountain ranges, before arriving at a plain of snow.

He didn't know what this place was, just that it extended for tens of thousands of miles and was unbearably cold. The ground had an extremely thick layer of snow that was pure to the point of being eye-piercing.

He didn't know what this snow plain was, nor did he understand the significance of what this thickness, this purity represented for cultivators. What he also didn't know, was that whether be it the legendary Junior Uncle from Li Shan Sword Sect or any other peerless expert, if they were to know of him possessing this perfect snow plain, they would do all within their means to have him inherit their legacy.

Finally, he saw a lake.

This was a lake that was suspended within Heaven and Earth, blue and clear, under his divine sense, he could judge its size to be

several hundreds of miles in diameter. To be more accurate, this was a sphere of water, that was suspended within Heaven and Earth. The water was free of any impurities; no growths, no earth and no sediment, only crystal clear water was present, allowing light to freely pass through unhindered.

Up to this point, his divine sense had already traversed this microscopic world once; according to the definition of cultivation, he had already entered the Meditative Realm, if this was to be made known, it would definitely shock the world, as it meant he possessed the purest, most tranquil divine sense in the world, one that could surpass the boundary between realms.

The problem was, it had no meaning.

No matter how vast or strong the divine sense was, without True Essence, you would still be nothing more than a normal person, the most it could do was to help extend the reach of what he could sense.

True Essence came from Star Brilliance.

From Spring till Winter, he had guided Starlight for Purification, the Purification wasn't completed, so where had the accumulated Star Brilliance gone to?

Chen Chang Sheng was getting increasingly nervous.

Contact between his divine sense and Star Brilliance would

immediately result in the Star Brilliance turning into True Essence. His body had yet to complete its Purification, but had been toughened through long years of medical decoctions by his Master and Senior; could it withstand the horrifyingly explosive energy that would result?

His divine sense once again traversed the microscopic Heaven and Earth, travelling tens of thousands of miles in a moment's time.

In the end, he gazed at the plain of snow... whiteness abounded; this was clean; this was a beautiful sight.

His divine sense floated higher and he could clearly see that this snow plain was slowly melting away, but due to the constant falling of snow, the snow plain didn't diminish in size and was instead constantly growing, thickening; yet, under the light, you could make out places where cracks had formed.

The cracks were small in number, but were dispersed across the entire snow plain, separating the plain into tens of fragments.

Was it this place?

It was this place.

He silently looked at the plain of snow in joy.

The snow wasn't really snow, but was actually Star Brilliance

that had crystallised.

He could cultivate.

The Star Brilliance was present.

Yet, what should he do next?

He didn't ponder this for too long, this wasn't something he had a choice on.

Upon his divine sense's confirmation of the Star Brilliance, the microscopic Heaven and Earth also perceived it.

Observe, and then decide: contact.

From the skies above to the ground below, it was a distance in the number of tens of thousands of miles, or perhaps only the distance of a single finger; his divine sense travelled that distance in an instant.

His divine sense touched down upon the south-eastern part of the snow plain, on a small fragment that was slowly drifting away.

That wisp of his divine sense was like a torch, alighting upon a mountain of dry leaves.

The crystallised Star Brilliance immediately let out a brilliant light and then started to burn fiercely.

There was no sound nor smoke, only a violently raging blaze.

The small fragment of snow plain was at least one qing (area: $\sim 61,440\text{m}^2$) in size, upon the landing of his divine sense, within a moment, the entirety of the small fragment had lit up in a blaze.

A clean and clear flame, that was of an exceedingly high temperature, scorched the skies.

The crystals melted while burning, turning into something akin to magma, slowly flowing away in all directions, it didn't take long to reach the area outside of the snow plain and arrive at the wild plains.

The magma flowed into the fractured cliffs and set them ablaze.

It flowed in the fragmented ley lines and set the ground alight.

The entire microscopic Heaven and Earth started to burn.

Within the cold frigid underground space, a warm presence suddenly appeared.

The Black Dragon looked at Chen Chang Sheng and saw that the snow landing upon his body immediately melted; the look of

indifference in its eyes was replaced with surprise.

Soon, it was replaced with a tightened gaze.

Chen Chang Sheng's face reddened, the breath coming from his mouth and nose, upon coming into contact with the underground space's frigid air, immediately turned to white mist.

Snow that fell upon his body immediately melted, then instantly turned to steam, his entire body was covered by a veil of white mist.

Just how high was his body's current temperature?

The Black Dragon's eyes revealed an expression of worry, and it lightly blew some air across him.

The frosty Dragon Breath fell upon Chen Chang Sheng's body.

In an instant, the surface of Chen Chang Sheng's body was covered by a clear ice shroud.

Yet in the next moment, this ice shroud fractured, melted and dissipated into steam.

Chen Chang Sheng's face turned increasingly red and his body, increasingly hot. The blood vessels in his neck thickened, before bulging out; it didn't take long before other blood vessels in his

body also started thickening and bulging outwards on his skin. His veins snaked across his body and created a horrifying scene; you could even faintly make out the rapid flow of his blood within its vessels.

The quiet underground space was suddenly punctuated by rapid thudding sounds; this was... his heartbeat.

His heart was rapidly beating, while his blood was rapidly flowing within his blood vessels; his clothing was rapidly soaked through with sweat, before once again drying out in steam.

His body was automatically reacting to his situation, attempting to solve the problem he currently faced.

Yet at this time, the True Essence that was being created from Star Brilliance was raging wildly within his body; without having experienced Purification, how could his body withstand this?

Not to mention that his meridians were naturally broken; his capacity for True Essence was far smaller than that of a regular person's; his situation, far more dangerous.

Chen Chang Sheng tightly clenched his eyes shut; the vessels on the edge of his eyes rapidly jumped; his brows crossed tightly; evidence of the current pain he was in.

He had skipped Purification and directly performed meditative introspection, this was to confirm whether the Star Brilliance

existed or not and settle his mind, otherwise he wouldn't be able to accept giving up on the Grand Examination.

Now he had seen that plain of snow, the Star Brilliance was ablaze and turning into True Essence, yet he was also about to die, was this something he could accept?

Looking at the painful expression of the youth, the Black Dragon's eyes revealed pity, yet it continued to not interfere.

Chapter 124 – Immaculate

The Black Dragon didn't interfere because it knew it couldn't save Chen Chang Sheng, even if its Royal Father was to be present, they would still be unable to save this youth. Star Brilliance from the natural world transforming into a cultivator's own True Essence, this process and subsequent movement of the True Essence was dependent upon the strength of the cultivator's body.

Chen Chang Sheng had yet to complete his Purification, his flesh, bones and organs were too weak to endure this. His True Essence at this moment was explosively bursting outwards, akin to countless minute blades piercing his body; if even his Ethereal Palace was to be instantly sundered, who would be able to save him?

Chen Chang Sheng's face turned ever more crimson in colour, this was not a healthy sort of crimson, but a horrifying visage. His entire body was cloaked in vapour and his face, twisted in pain. With a single popping sound, the blood vessels on the edge his eyes had split open, no longer able to withstand the pressure.

Flesh blood showered forth like blossoms from his face; upon coming into contact with the frigid air and bringing forth mist, before crystalizing and falling onto the ground, akin to a spiralling coral. Following this, increasing numbers of blood vessels around his body also started erupting, causing countless spurts of fresh blood to gush forwards; the boiling temperature managed to warm the underground space slightly before rapidly cooling down and congealing.

The surroundings of Chen Chang Sheng were being increasingly dyed in red, creating coral-like patterns; a pretty image that was marred by how gory it actually was.

Following the rupturing of blood vessels came the fracturing of skin, then flesh; copious amounts of blood ran from his body and his underlying bones could occasionally be seen flashing in white; he painfully shut his eyes as he could no longer maintain his sitting position and fell upon the floor convulsing; a horrifying scene that wrenched the heart.

The Black Dragon covered its eyes with its right claw, unable to continue looking onwards, it was filled with deep regret: this agreeable human youth was about to die and would be unable to help it complete that task. It had originally wanted to prevent this from happening, but since it was Chen Chang Sheng's personal choice, it had stayed its hand as a sign of respect, for both Chen Chang Sheng and the roast lamb he had brought.

At this moment, the Black Dragon did not think about its escape, nor did it think about the solitude it had endured for hundreds of years or its impending continuation. All it could do was to silently hope, hope for Chen Chang Sheng to quickly pass, so that his suffering may end sooner, only such a death was worthy of Chen Chang Sheng's calm courage in the face of death.

The underground space was always locked in a wintry chill and the floor was covered in snow and ice; Chen Chang Sheng was sprawled out upon the earth, flesh rent, bones sundered, hot blood gushed out to meet the surrounding snow and resulted in white mist rising up to the sound of crackling; the Star Brilliance within

his body was burning too intensely, causing his blood to act like as if it was boiling.

As recorded within the addendum of the Four Classics of Meditation, if it weren't for the cold and frigid underground space, Chen Chang Sheng would have ended with a self-explosion; due to the chill brought on by the Black Dragon, he hadn't started combusting away, but this was effectively just a matter of dying in a more sightly manner.

Time slowly passed by.

After a long period of time, the Black Dragon lowered its claw, preparing to express lament for Chen Chang Sheng; this human youth was, after all, the first person it had come into proper contact with for the past few hundred years.

Thinking of this, it decided that even if Chen Chang Sheng's remains had become a sickening pile of cooked flesh, it would cover its nose and give him a burial.

Looking upon the bloody coral's centre, the Black Dragon's pupils suddenly shrank; its ghostly pupils revealed its current dumbfoundedness.

The ground was still cloaked in white mist, and the blood within the snow continued to broil away instead of cooling upon Chen Chang Sheng's death.

The reason for this was... Chen Chang Sheng was still alive.

Why hasn't he died? Why wasn't he dead?

The Black Dragon did not wish for his death, but it was stunned by the scene before its eyes, this was something outside the scope of the dragon tribe's knowledge on the world – and everyone knew that the dragon tribe had the most knowledge in the world.

Star Brilliance burning from within to without; everything from the heart to the skin would be destroyed; this was something unpreventable and irreversible. Therefore, why was he still alive?

The Black Dragon contained its shock and awe; slowly drifting forwards.

Accompanying the movement of its massive body, a chill wind emerged within the underground space.

The wind stirred up the blood corals, with the broiling blood creating a white mist that swept away the wretched bloody foam that had covered Chen Chang Sheng's visage, revealing the image below.

The Star Brilliance had indeed erupted from within to without; most of his internal organs had been severely damaged.

But within his chest, something continued beating away strongly.

His heart was still strongly beating.

The Black Dragon's pupils once again shrunk tightly.

It knew of the human heart's form.

But it had never seen such a clean and pure heart.

The blood stains on the surface of the heart would disperse to one side on every beat, revealing the heart's original appearance.

That was a clean, glass-like, pink coloured heart; there was nothing revolting about it at all, akin to a fruit that had been cleansed within a stream for some time.

The Black Dragon was shocked, akin to having seen a Desert Bone Dragon.

Chen Chang Sheng's muscle, skin and bone had been destroyed; the Star Brilliance continued burning, continued destroying his body, yet, why was this internal part of him untouched, what was this heart made of? Why was it completely undamaged?

The Black Dragon's gaze fell upon the bloody corals and sweltering blood, feeling stranger as time passed. This grisly scene did nothing to arouse its disgust – True Nobles of the dragon tribe did not feed upon beings that had intelligence – the surrounding

flesh and blood did not seem like flesh and blood, but felt akin to something else.

That's correct; corals; glass; clean; clear.

The Black Dragon once again turned its gaze upon Chen Chang Sheng's heart, dimly understanding something.

Purification through Starlight, washed away impurity, leaving behind the pure, the clean. Purification was something a cultivator continued for their entire life, pursuing a realm of perfection: The Immaculate.

Chen Chang Sheng's body was unusual, and had a lot of unexplainable factors, such as his meridians that were split into nine. Maybe his blood, flesh and bone were also different, or perhaps... naturally immaculate; even if external factors such as food and air had added some impurity, it would have been minute and upon Purification through Starlight, it would have been purified within an instant.

Then what else could the Starlight purify?

Starlight, upon coming into contact with something hued in colour, could reveal its own, but upon coming into contact with something crystal-clear, what could it reveal?

Something crystal-clear, did not have any colour.

The Starlight naturally continued flowing.

From Spring till now, Chen Chang Sheng had guided Starlight for Purification nightly, the Starlight had no effect on his skin or hair, nor did it transform his flesh and bone; it had directly entered his body, triggering a link between the macroscopic and microscopic Heaven and Earth, arriving before his Ethereal Palace.

The crooked Ethereal Opening had a palace.

This was the Ethereal Palace.

Chapter 125 – Rouge

The Ethereal Palace is the heart.

The Starlight from countless nights had settled upon the surroundings of his Ethereal Palace, gradually accumulating, gradually tranquil, without sound, without disturbance.

Upon its understanding, the Black Dragon became even more dumbfounded.

Chen Chang Sheng's guidance of Starlight for Purification hadn't had any effect, forcing him to take the risk of entering meditative introspection. Yet, he couldn't have guessed that in his nightly attempts at Purification, the Starlight had passed through his body and arrived before his Ethereal Palace, knocking at its entrance incessantly, night after night.

He wasn't going through Purification, and had even skipped across Meditation; this was Ethereal Opening.

Since that time when he had illuminated his Fated Star, how many nights had passed?

The Black Dragon looked at the pool of blood and the youth within who was about to draw his last breath; it was so nervous it had almost forgotten to breathe itself.

Since the descending of the Heavenly Tomes, there hasn't been

anyone cultivating the same way as Chen Chang Sheng. This was because his unusual state of being naturally immaculate was extraordinarily rare, it was also due to there being very few people who had to live under the shadow of death itself, leading to unimaginable tenacity and will. Even if there was to be someone fulfilling these requirements, they would lack his fortune.

Without fortune, he would still die; even having skipped the realms of Purification and Meditation to successfully complete his Ethereal Opening, he would still die. The cultivation realms concluded upon by humanity in its entirety, was unquestionable; it was impossible to skip, without a successful Purification, a cultivator cannot withstand the energy produced in the instant Star Brilliance transitioned into True Essence.

Chen Chang Sheng's heart continued to beat strongly, but the blood flowing from his perforated blood vessels became increasingly little. With his tightly shut eyes and ashen face, he looked to be no different from a dead person.

The Black Dragon quietly looked at him contemplatively, its eyes revealed its current turbulent feelings and indecision; its struggle and how loath it was to give up.

It knew very well that itself was the fortune Chen Chang Sheng needed.

Chen Chang Sheng at this moment was already close to the point of death, even the most precious of medicine and pills would be unable to save him; even if the Pope or some equivalent Saint were to raise their hand, it would be useless; yet, it could save him.

There existed only one method in existence that could save Chen Chang Sheng.

The Black Dragon struggled for a long time, especially upon remembering its imprisonment by humans for these past hundreds of years, it wanted to turn around and leave Chen Chang Sheng to his fate.

On what justification was there for it to sacrifice so much for this human youth?

Yet... this chance of survival for him was not an easy one to come by.

Not to mention, his aid is needed for completing that task.

Not to mention, this was the first person it had properly met for the past few hundred years.

His chance of life, was perhaps also its own chance of life?

The Black Dragon silently pondered, but it hadn't noticed that it was merely trying to persuade itself to save the human youth.

After a long period of time, it finally came to a decision.

The Black Dragon moved before Chen Chang Sheng's body and

let out a low Dragon Roar, in conjunction with the roar, a scale between its eyes instantly lit up brightly.

It lifted its front claw on the right, slowly moving it closer to the dragon scale.

A crack resounded.

The dragon scale cracked.

A mass of blood came forth from this small fissure.

This was Primordial Dragon's Blood.

A clashing sound resounded.

The mass of dragon blood splashed down from above and fell upon the ground, bathing Chen Chang Sheng's entire body.

This simple action, seemingly took up the entirety of the Black Dragon's strength. The mass of dragon blood in terms of volume, was enough to contain Chen Chang Sheng's entire body, but in comparison to the Black Dragon's enormous body, it should have been minute, yet it had greatly weakened the dragon.

The Black Dragon slowly landed upon the ground, its dragon whiskers weakly hovering, before becoming crooked; its massive body no longer had any vigour, akin to a listless mountain range.

Following this, something incredibly fantastical occurred.

Only the sound of scales scraping across the snow underneath could be heard, the sound of rustling abounded and then, a sound akin to the fracturing of rock could be heard.

The Black Dragon was in the process of slowly shrinking in length and size.

The listless, black mountain range, slowly transformed into a mountain ridge.

The Black Dragon continued shrinking.

The mountain ridge finally became a small bump upon the ground's surface.

The ice and dust shrouded dragon scales, had transformed into an old-looking black dress.

After a brief moment, a hand slowly extended from within the black dress, a pale and delicate hand.

The hand touched upon the ground and lightly flexed, raising up her body.

Wearing the black dress was a young girl.

An extremely pretty girl.

The young girl had a frosty expression, her eyes had pupils that were vertical slits and she possessed an excessively bewitching charm. Though she looked very young, she gave the feeling of extreme apathy.

Between her brow was a singular red line, that spoiled this feeling.

This was a wound that was going to be difficult to recover from, but it was also alluring, akin to an adornment that was fashionable within the Zhou Empire's Capital many hundreds of years ago.

She couldn't stand up, because she was currently too weak, too tired; it was also because she had, around her ankles, two small, long chains.

The two chains were covered in rust and extended into the darkness, tightly grasped within the hands of two legendary Divine Generals that were depicted upon the wall.

She looked at Chen Chang Sheng who was within the pool of blood before her, saying, with a cold expression: "If you were to betray me, then I will withstand my disgust and devour you."

She said those words calmly and coolly, but also assuredly.

She had used human speech, her voice clear and crisp. Coupled with her infantile look, she had the appearance of a little girl.

In truth, converting to human years, she was only around 13 to 14 years of age.

Upon Chen Chang Sheng's heavily damaged body, blood stains permeated.

It was however, hard to distinguish whether the blood was his own, or dragon blood.

He was immersed within her blood.

The Primordial Dragon's blood was slowly restoring his body.

The ruptured blood vessels, at a speed noticeable to the eye, gradually resealed; his ulcerated skin, under the glow of the Luminous Pearls, slowly recovered its smoothness; as for his broken bones and internals, they needed a longer time to heal, but everything was evidently recovering.

His face was still pale, but his breath slowly steadied.

The black-garbed girl stared at him; the stare lasted for an extremely long time.

After a long period of time, having confirmed Chen Chang Sheng

would live, and that her precious drop of dragon blood had not been wasted, she could no longer endure her weakened state and thus, fell into a tired slumber.

Chen Chang Sheng was asleep within the blood pool opposite her.

The two of them, respectively slept within the icy cold underground.

White mist gently wandered and bloody corals fragmented throughout.

A scene that was filled with blood, yet strangely transcendent and divine.

Snow and wind, enmeshed the skies, the outside of the Imperial Palace was silent and devoid of people.

Two snow mastiffs were joyfully playing upon the cold, snow-laden ground, pouncing upon each other; only the cold gaze within the mastiff's eyes reminded people that these were ferocious beasts.

The palace maid held onto the leash and stood to the side, showing that she was feeling somewhat bored. Snowflakes fluttered across her pretty eyes and you could make out the remnants of makeup across her brows; it was actually Mo Yu. She was originally a palace maid, if it wasn't for Her Divine Majesty,

The Divine Empress' recognition, as the descendent of a convicted official, she would have spent her entire life in some secluded isolation palace.

A figure slowly emerged from within the blizzard; Mo Yu smiled as she went forward to receive them.

The Divine Empress ignored the snow mastiffs that had prostrated themselves upon the snow in a show of fear and deference; she expressionlessly walked over to the abandoned well.

After a moment, her brow gently quivered; she was rendered slightly speechless. He actually lived?

Chapter 126 – Transformation

The dense blizzard silently fell upon the ground, the area around the abandoned well was quiet. The trees at New North Bridge had completely shed their leaves and the upper reaches of the trees were filled with snow, akin to sentries holding spears.

The Divine Empress clasped her hands together, and looked towards the direction of the faraway Orthodox Academy; after a moment of silence, she said: “The Grand Examination is imminent, what are your thoughts?”

“His Holiness, The Pope, on Your Divine Majesty’s suggestion, took Her Highness into the palace, but did not otherwise reveal any stance.”

Mo Yu looked at the Divine Empress’ side and quietly said: “My view is that the simplest solution would be to kill Chen Chang Sheng, then there wouldn’t be anymore troubles.”

The turbulence created by Orthodox Academy, upon the Divine Empress revealing her stance, was not mentioned again by others, but Mo Yu did not believe that the Empress had wanted to use the incident as proof of her tolerance and magnanimity. She believed the Empress had wanted to instead wait for those standing in the shadows behind Orthodox Academy to reveal themselves.

The Divine Empress was aware of everything happening in the world, the current questioning for her opinion must only be a test of her attitude towards this affair, therefore she had to show

strength in her stance.

Contrary to her expectations however, the Divine Empress did not express any commendation for her strong, and slightly merciless stance. Instead, the edge of the Empress' mouth lightly curled up, revealing a slightly mocking smile, before saying: "Such a style of handling matters is too boring. Not to mention, if he was to be killed, how would you manage to sleep well at night? You must know that the scent left in pillows and bedding will eventually disappear."

Mo Yu was immediately flustered upon hearing those words, thinking to herself as to how should she explain herself.

The Divine Empress didn't give her a chance to explain, turning around to face her with a look that was hard to ascertain whether if she was laughing or not, and said: "On the night of the Ivy League gathering, you were the one that confined him at Tong Palace?"

Mo Yu suddenly felt that today's snow was rather chilling to the bone and answered without daring to hesitate, "Yes."

The Divine Empress no longer looked at the abandoned well, and said: "That is a good place."

Mo Yu didn't dare to say anything else; respectfully and deferentially lowering her head, while supporting the Divine Empress's hand and heading for the Imperial Palace.

Confining Chen Chang Sheng at Tong Palace on the night of the Ivy League gathering was done at the request of a certain dignitary, as to how Chen Chang Sheng had managed to escape, and whether if he had really entered the depths of the icy pond, or whether if he met that taboo, Mo Yu did not know and did not dare to know; no matter how you look at it, it was her fault.

The Empress did not state whether if she approved of or disapproved of her planning, but since she had mentioned it, this must have been a warning.

The entirety of the Imperial Court knew that Mo Yu was the second most powerful woman in existence, possessing unimaginable wealth and power. Her occasional application of some rouge in between her brows on a whim could bring back that fashion that had been dormant for hundreds of years, but she was also well aware of the fact that everything she had was due to the consent and bestowal of the Empress.

If the Empress was to become wary of her, she would lose everything, including a burial.

The snow and wind today was indeed especially cold, the fingers on her hand that was supporting the Empress began to pale, her lips were also pale, without a shred of crimson.

Chen Chang Sheng woke up upon his bed at Orthodox Academy.

His face was pale beyond belief; including his lips, there wasn't a trace of crimson to be seen.

But his body was covered in blood, from his shoulders to his chest to the nails on his fingers were covered in hardened blood, in contrast to the snow-white bedding, it evoked a horrifying image.

Staring at the ceiling, he stretched open his eyes, remaining silent, until five moments had passed and his breathing slowly calmed. He then slowly turned over, using his left arm to support himself through grasping his bedside and slowly sat up.

On the edge of the bed, he sat for another five moments, waiting for his heartbeat to return to normal, before getting up and walking over to the mirror.

He looked at the image in the mirror, of a youth who was covered in blood and remained silent for a long while.

He was still alive; this sort of feeling was wonderful.

He had come back from the brink of death, to return to the world of the living, this feeling was extremely pleasing.

As for what had actually happened in the underground space, he was unclear of, he only knew that when the Star Brilliance had started burning, his consciousness had fell into an abyss, the abyss was filled with burning, flames, smoke and heat; violent sundering, unimaginable pain and despair.

He felt as if he had just experienced a dream, but he was certain

that what happened was reality. He was currently still in a slightly confused state, he subconsciously raised his sleeve and took a sniff, his clothing was covered in the stains of blood and even though it didn't give off the rank smell of blood, for he, who enjoyed being clean, it was still unbearable

He thought that all the blood belonged to himself, but it was still unbearable, therefore he started to wash, washing multiple times before being certain that he had cleared all the blood. Taking a large towel to dry himself, he went before the mirror, preparing to open the window to let in some of the fresh air that was contained within the winter snow outside.

Crossing before the large mirror, he suddenly stopped his steps and turned his gaze towards the mirror.

In the mirror, the youth was bare at the top, with nothing abnormal; but he had discovered something that was definitely abnormal.

Few people in the world were like him, being very familiar with and understanding their own body – due to his illness, he was especially concerned with this issue – he remembered very clearly, on his upper left arm, there was a scar from when his Senior had accidentally made a mistake during acupuncture. But now, the scar had disappeared; his upper left arm was smooth as can be.

It was at this moment that he noticed his skin had become a lot smoother, akin to that of a new-born. What puzzled him even more was that he had definitely suffered serious injuries, yet there was not a single scar to be seen upon his body, even scars from old

wounds had disappeared, including the most minute.

Could it be, that this was Purification? From Spring till now, the Star Brilliance that had been absorbed from that distant Fated Star, upon its conversion to True Essence, had a portion of it helped him successfully complete Purification?

He didn't become wildly jubilant at this, as he was still in a state of confusion and vacancy.

He looked at the youth in the mirror; frowning his eyes and seriously contemplating.

Contemplating, was one of the most effective ways to calm and rouse yourself. His mind became increasingly clear, and started remembering more details; he finally remembered, upon the moment of him losing consciousness, he was still in the cold and frigid underground space, standing before Venerable Elder Black Dragon; why was he already back at Orthodox Academy upon waking up?

He looked at the damp towel, then lightly kneaded it, confirming that the moisture was real.

He went to the window and looked at the wintry woods, towards the Imperial Palace's walls, thinking: the exit to the underground space was that pond, if it wasn't the Black Goat that found a way to bring him back to the academy, then the only other possibility was the middle-aged woman, just who was that middle-aged woman?

Just what had happened in that underground space? Why was he still alive? Had he really managed to complete his Purification?

He quietly pondered by the window-side for a long time, until finally coming to a decision. Returning to the bedside, he removed the bedding as well as he could, before crossing his legs and sitting down, closing his eyes, he began to Meditate, self-observe.

That abyss which was brimming with despair had arose from his meditative introspection, but now that he had survived, he did not hesitate to once again meditate and self-observe, this was because even though living was a good thing for himself, he could not accept living in ignorance, he needed to elucidate his current state.

His divine sense once again entered his body and started to slowly wander, but having gained experience, this was no longer an aimless observation, but more akin to an inspection of his own territory, it did not take long for his divine sense to reach the vast snow plain and he gazed at it from far above.

His eyes were closed, his lashes fluttered, his face was as white as snow.

He was very nervous, fearful that his divine sense would, like before, directly land upon the snow plain and once again set it ablaze into a horrifying inferno.

Even someone with a strong will such as he, would not wish to experience that kind of pain again.

The lucky thing was, this time, his divine sense did not land, and nothing unexpected occurred.

The vast snow plain was still a vast snow plain; his divine sense noticed that a fragment of snow plain on the edge had disappeared after burning, transforming into tens of small streams, that flowed towards the South, nourishing the desolate wild plains, but these streams were too small; with the broken mountain ranges, this could not constitute a water flow.

Those small streams must be True Essence, due to the unusual characteristics of his meridians, the two could not combine the way it would for normal cultivators, and could thus, only exist within a small area.

Chen Chang Sheng opened his eyes and started pondering.

His current situation looked similar to that of Luo Luo, but in reality, it was vastly different.

Luo Luo's internal True Essence was overflowing in abundance, but the meridian channels of yao, in comparison to a human's, were exceedingly simplistic, making it difficult to practise human cultivation arts.

The problem pertaining to meridians was something he had spent the last few years considering, which was why he could solve Luo Luo's problem in the space of only a few short months. In truth, solving Luo Luo's problem was also a preparation for solving his own problem, with regards to how he should cultivate, he had

already made plans for.

That's correct, the current levels of True Essence within his body was limited and his meridian channels were broken, but that didn't mean he couldn't cultivate.

He once again returned to the window-side, looked at that most eye-catching Cloud Pine that was growing by the lake side, tempered his breath for a moment, then grasped the hilt of his small sword.

The sound of a clash ascended as the short sword left its scabbard, and an edge of sword manifestation appeared, travelling from the second floor's window towards the tree.

Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, the First Movement, Rising Flurry.

He did not have the True Essence manipulation technique of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, so he used the method he had taught Luo Luo as an imitation.

This was Chen Chang Sheng's first time using True Essence, from this moment onwards, he would refer to himself as a cultivator, a practitioner of The Way.

Anyone with the same experiences as he had, should, at this moment, be delighted beyond words, possibly to the point of tears, but he was different. The same as when he had previously

confirmed the flow of True Essence within his body, he was calm to the point of not resembling a 15-year-old youth, but more akin to an Elder that had cultivated for 500 years.

This was because cultivation was never his aim, it was only a means; he had also acted out this scene within his mind countless times to the point where he was now more or less numb to it.

Following the sword manifestation cutting through the air, his face paled, a single grunt was let out as he felt the pain.

The distant Cloud Pine was untouched, but the stone balcony outside the window was damaged, multiple stone fragments shot into the room like darts, they thudded as they hit the wall, and a single fragment struck him upon the left arm.

Using the method taught to Luo Luo had its problems, finding a new channel was not an easy task.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head and turned around, preparing to take out medicinal powder and bandage his left arm.

Even though his True Essence was feeble and couldn't wield the full power of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, it was still a blade brandishing True Essence; the stones that had been projected were comparable in power to regular arrows, and had lodged themselves deeply into the wall, this was naturally enough to wound his left arm.

He thought to himself that he should be more careful in the future.

He then noticed, his left arm was unhurt, not even a single hair's worth of damage had occurred.

Chapter 127 – A Weight Upon The Waist (1)

He really wasn't hurt. This shocked Chen Chang Sheng, as he couldn't understand why; even if he had surmised correctly that the Star Brilliance's transition into True Essence had also helped to complete his Purification once, it shouldn't have strengthened his body to this shocking extent, the power behind that stone fragment was considerable.

He extended his hand out of the window, and under the snow-reflected daylight, he carefully examined everything; even though he had maintained a calm demeanour previously, the fact that he had True Essence flowing within his body had managed to captivate all of his attention, only at this moment, had he started to seriously examine his own body.

After a moment, his brow lightly twitched; apart from his physique becoming better toned, and his skin becoming clearer, there were no other discernible differences, but with the entirety of his attention being focused upon examining his body, he could faintly sense that it now possessed something it didn't before, something akin to a different presence.

He walked before the mirror and found a hairpin; the hairpin was probably left behind by Mo Yu from a few days ago. He picked up the hairpin and looked at its sharp tip, considered for a moment, then proceeded to stab his arm with the tip. He could feel the sensation of the hairpin's tip coming into contact with his skin and its sharpness, but the sensation was far duller than usual and it didn't penetrate his skin; the sharp tip hadn't managed to leave any mark.

He increased the strength with which he stabbed his arm and the pain appropriately increased, but it still couldn't penetrate his skin; it was as if his skin had undergone some incredible transformation and no matter how much farther in the tip was pushed, he didn't get the feeling that his skin would be penetrated, akin to a lotus leaf that was sustaining the weight of some dew.

Chen Chang Sheng put down the hairpin and took out his small sword for a test.

After a moment, looking at the thin bloody line upon his left arm, he was certain that his body had undergone some incredible transformation without his knowledge, which increased its strength and toughness immensely; even the most perfect of Purifications recorded within the Scripture of The Way would not have had the same capability as his current state.

What had happened? That question could probably only be answered by Venerable Elder Black Dragon. Chen Chang Sheng felt the faint flow of energy, or presence, that was within his body; he no longer suppressed the feelings of uncertainty he had, nor could he continue suppressing the sudden feeling of vigour that beset him, he quickly dressed himself and leapt out of the window.

His shoes touched upon the snow and flattened the underlying foliage, he steadied himself, his expression a little vacuous. His room was on the second floor, and even though the height wasn't overly tall, and with the body that had been tempered by his Master and Senior, he wouldn't have hurt himself; but jumping down wasn't usually this easy or smooth.

He silently considered for a while, through the mist of his breath, he gazed towards the frosty lake within the wintry woods; he wanted to have another test.

Gently bending the knees, exerting strength from the waist, a single step.

A rushing sound abounded.

Upon the snow in front of the dorm, a small furrow appeared; snow and grass scattered into the air.

Chen Chang Sheng's body disappeared on the spot.

In the next moment, he reappeared besides the lake, a distance of about 30 metres (~100 feet).

Shed leaves started fluttering as the cold wind stirred.

He had a vacant look upon his face that was slightly pale.

He had never expected to possess such a fast speed.

This was all due to the sudden dramatic increase to his strength and toughening of his body.

Where did this energy come from?

Was this really the effect of Purification?

Purification seemed to be the only explanation, but it wasn't one he could readily accept.

Thinking back upon his earlier bathing, while washing away the coagulated blood into the water, he had felt an odd feeling, this prompted him to suddenly feel uncomfortable.

He traversed the academy walls and left Orthodox Academy, under the cover of snow, he once again arrived at New North Bridge.

The snow was falling as heavily as ever, piling upon the ground in layers.

The two trails of footsteps alongside snow mastiff paw marks that had been left behind near the abandoned well, had long been covered up by the snow.

He observed the surroundings; upon confirming that no one was paying any attention to him and that the palace guards were changing shifts, he leapt into the well.

A thud could be heard as his feet touched ground, surprising him.

He had prepared himself for a long descent and didn't expect to reach the bottom so shortly after jumping.

The abandoned well was previously bottomless, the chasm-like darkness below led straight into that underground space, to the Black Dragon.

But now, it had a bottom; a bottom composed of soil (loess), covered with a thin layer of snow.

He raised his head to look outside of the well; snowflakes drifting in caused him to squint his eyes.

Squatting down, he gauged the thickness of the accumulated snow, estimating that the well had been sealed for less than half a day.

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“You wouldn't?”

Tang Thirty-Six took the kitchen knife from Chen Chang Sheng's hand before staring at him and questioning.

These past few days had been Chen Chang Sheng's turn to do the cooking; Tang Thirty-Six disliked his cooking, thinking that it was lacking in taste in comparison to Xuan Yuan Po's, therefore he had come to remind Chang Sheng that pickled pepper stir fry with meat should include pickled peppers, it was at this time that he

came in just as Chen Chang Sheng had raised the kitchen knife and was preparing to hack at his own finger.

Chen Chang Sheng knew that he had misunderstood the situation, and said: “Do you think I’m that type of person?”

That type of person? The type that couldn’t handle external pressure, that had to self-mutilate in order to escape reality, or more specifically, the type of person that couldn’t handle external pressure and had thus lost their sanity and only wanted to experience the euphoria of the edge of a blade; or maybe the type of person who couldn’t handle external pressure and would forget the love and care of their parents to leap from the top floor of some building.

“You’re not that type of fool, but I was afraid you might have suddenly decided to be unyielding and remove a finger in order to prove your determination.”

Tang Thirty-Six passed back the kitchen knife and said: “Geniuses that have completed their Purification wouldn’t create this type of misunderstanding.”

Cultivators that had completed Purification would have greatly toughened bodies, wanting to use a regular kitchen knife to cut off a finger wouldn’t be impossible, but would be comparatively difficult.

“The purified aren’t afraid of kitchen knives, yet I don’t see you helping out with slicing the ingredients.” Chen Chang Sheng

received the kitchen knife and continued with cutting the radish.

Over the past few days, he had revisited New North Bridge twice, but it had been completely sealed off. Therefore, he could only learn to adjust to the changes of his body; using the kitchen knife to chop at his finger was something he regularly tried; only through getting used to the strength and toughness of his body could he properly make use of it in actual battle.

Tang Thirty-Six's concern for him was natural, for the Grand Examination was about to commence.

Participants of the Grand Examination had already arrived from all parts of the continent, with countless gazes being directed towards Orthodox Academy, towards Chen Chang Sheng who had declared the intention to place first upon the First Banner. Though the declaration had been made by His Eminence, The Archbishop, and he had never personally acknowledged the declaration, this made no difference for the masses.

Owing to his betrothal with Xu You Rong, the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and that declaration, he was currently extremely well-known and had been ushered to some lofty standing, the problem was, who would actually accede to it? If it wasn't for Jin Yu Lu sitting on his seat, appreciating the snow while drinking his hot tea, Orthodox Academy's shattered front gate would have probably been crushed long ago.

The amount of pressure he was currently under did not need elucidating.

“I haven’t been able to understand this, if the tradition faction of the Orthodoxy and those dignitaries loyal to the Imperial Chen line want to use Orthodox Academy’s revival to challenge the Divine Empress’ authority, instead of using someone like you, who hasn’t been able to complete their Purification, wouldn’t I be a better choice?”

Tang Thirty-Six said this while picking up a vegetable leaf and filling it with rice, pickled peppers and vegetables.

Chen Chang Sheng placed the sliced radish into the bone soup that had been simmering for a while, saying: “A small character like me is probably easier to control.”

Tang Thirty-Six daintily took a mouthful of his rice wrap, mumbling out: “I think the most important reason is because of your betrothal to Xu You Rong.”

The youths of Orthodox Academy were aware of their position, therefore they used terms such as “small character”, this type of attitude reflected their indifference to the so-called “great figures”, what these great figures wanted to realise was of no concern to them, they only wanted to continue with their life, enter their Grand Examination, and take their first place upon the First Banner.

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t inform Tang Thirty-Six of the changes to his body, nor did he tell of the Star Brilliance’s transition into True Essence; he had no wish to experience that inferno of despair

again.

That plain of snow, for him, had become akin to the age of twenty, it had become a shadow upon his heart that could not be cast off, able to make him panic to the point of gasping for air.

How could he ensure that the snow plain will remain undisturbed? By not disturbing it; by avoiding meditative introspection; by avoiding thoughts of it; better yet, by completely forgetting it. Alas, completely shutting it off in his mind was something hard to achieve, especially when he thought of how the vast snow plain was composed entirely of Star Brilliance; if it were to all transform into True Essence, how much could it produce?

He forlornly said: “The feeling of being wealthy is good.”

“I don’t feel anything,” said Tang Thirty-Six.

“That’s because you’ve had wealth since you were young,” replied Chen Chang Sheng.

“Maybe,” Tang Thirty-Six said, conceding the point after considering for a while.

Chen Chang Sheng continued: “But the feeling of having wealth, yet not being able to spend it, isn’t very good.”

Tang Thirty-Six sympathetically replied: “You’re such a hick, wait till the Grand Examination is over, I’ll teach you how to spend

money.”

The snow plain was Chen Chang Sheng’s abundant accrument, but also a fearsome stack of hay, a single spark could set it alight, and upon its transformation into ashes, he would accompany it into oblivion.

Under these circumstances, anyone with some sense would choose to avoid disturbing it, or adding to the hay stack, Chen Chang Sheng thought differently however, continuing to meditate every night and guiding Starlight into his body. With both hands grasping onto the jade crystals provided by Luo Luo and surrounding his body with the crystals sent by the Wen Shui Tang clan, he showed nary a fear in the world.

Others did not know of his body’s current condition, and thus looked upon this scene with a different interpretation; Tang Thirty-Six, who already respected him greatly, thought to himself that anyone else attempting to Purify for such a long time without success would have long given up, for this fellow to persist to this extent, was a testament to his terrifying will.

Though respect is one thing; he longer held any hope of Chen Chang Sheng being able to place first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination.

Even the most optimistic of people, would share this view.

Therefore... he became increasingly diligent.

The Proclamation of Azure Cloud's evaluation, alongside Chen Chang Sheng's example, both of these things were the reason for his diligence, more importantly however, were Chen Chang Sheng to fail in placing first, he would undoubtedly become a figure for the masses to mock; as his friend, as a student of Orthodox Academy, he had to do something.

Xuan Yuan Po was just as diligent. His right arm had fully recovered and under the guidance of Chen Chang Sheng, he was currently practising a discipline art, resulting in great gains to his strength and boundless vigour. This resulted in misery for the great tree by the lake and the hard bluestone was akin to the fragments of ice on the lake's surface, constantly shattering.

This peaceful school life was suddenly broken one morning by a lone horse-carriage.

At that time, Tang Thirty-Six was in the midst of a squabble with Xuan Yuan Po, while Chen Chang Sheng was amongst the snow, reciting something unfamiliar.

Chapter 128 – A Weight Upon The Waist (2)

The conversation by the lakeside at the time, went like this:

Tang Thirty-Six, while looking at Xuan Yuan Po's right arm and its faintly visible, metallic black hairs, asked: "Dog Bear?"

Xuan Yuan Po gave him a single glance, knowing that he meant no harm and replied: "Bear."

Tang Thirty-Six gave an exclamation of acknowledgement, saying: "So it really is Dog Bear."

Xuan Yuan Po considered for a moment the difference between a Dog Bear and Bear, upon confirming that he was being made fun of, he replied: "Tang Thirty-Two, you're a bad person."

Tang Thirty-Six's face became a little grotesque and said: "I've already said this before, don't call me Tang Thirty-Two."

Xuan Yuan Po was insistent: "Tang Thirty-Two, didn't you say that you will name yourself after whatever ranking you have on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds?"

"That is to encourage myself."

Tang Thirty-Six explained, as he decided that he definitely had to try his hardest to obtain a ranking within the top ten on the next

proclamation.

“You also dislike the name of Tang Tang,” said Xuan Yuan Po.

“That name is too girlish,” replied Tang Thirty-Six.

Xuan Yuan Po’s gaze fell upon his chest, “For someone as petty and mean as you, if it wasn’t because you’re flat, you would definitely be mistaken for a girl.”

Upon finishing those words, he carried a tree that had been smashed in half on his shoulders and headed for the kitchen, no longer caring for Tang Thirty-Six.

This absurd bout of words, ended with the yao youth as its victor.

At the time of their bout, Chen Chang Sheng was situated not far away, dashing across the snow.

He was running at a very fast speed, with the snow and rain accompanying his steps, this wasn’t a digestive aid, but training – though it was rather incomprehensible, he had seemingly completed his Purification and within his body True Essence had started to flow, though the problem with his meridian channels was still unresolved – luckily, he had already prepared for this training; Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po’s improvement were evidence as to the validity of his approach.

The problem was, his quantity of True Essence was far too

limited, and he didn't dare to risk igniting another fragment of snow plain before the Grand Examination; if he wanted to achieve success, he had to think of some other methods, such as fully utilising the transformation of his body – he now possessed a strength that surpassed a regular yao; having incredible speed and toughness.

He decided to place his hopes upon martial arts, so he chose to concentrate on analysing Ye Shi (Discerning) Steps.

Discerning Steps was a closely guarded secret art of the demon race, having read the Scripture of The Way in its entirety, he had a rough understanding of it, and could remember the few thousand positions it utilised, to the point of being able to teach Luo Luo some simplified versions that had shocked the Ivy League gathering; yet, Guan Fei Bai's sword at the time, did not wield any True Essence; if he wanted to triumph against the other participants of the Grand Examination, relying upon simplified versions of Discerning Steps was not enough.

The snow covered ground was littered with his footsteps, before they had been covered over by the snow, they formed various patterns; some simple, some complicated; if the cloud covered skies above were to suddenly clear, and a person was to raise their head towards the starry sky, they would find that the patterns had some correspondence to the cover of stars above.

It was upon this moment, that a horse-drawn carriage from the Education Board came to Orthodox Academy, Minister Xin had come to visit.

Chen Chang Sheng and Tang Thirty-Six were a little surprised. Their applications to enter the Grand Examination had been completed, personally dealt with by Minister Xin, the Education Board had even secretly sent a copy of information on the other participants to Orthodox Academy, therefore, everything that could have been done had already been completed, with the Grand Examination being close, what need did he have to visit the academy? Did he not fear starting any rumours?

Jin Yu Lu held his teapot and looked at the two youths while shaking his head, thinking to himself that these were indeed good children, to have trouble understanding such matters.

Minister Xin explicated his reason for visiting; the application process had encountered a mistake and he needed Chen Chang Sheng to produce the school roster and seal for confirmation once again.

Having completed this task, Minister Xin did not immediately leave.

Chen Chang Sheng had Xuan Yuan Po bring a cup of tea as a gesture of gratitude.

Minister Xin held his teacup, but didn't drink; he left the library and stood by the lakeside, on the snowy ground; gazing upon the opposite shore, he suddenly said: "Wanting to reach the other shore, really does require boundless wisdom."

His melancholy over, he returned the teacup to Xuan Yuan Po's

hands, gave everyone a smile and then left in his horse-drawn carriage.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others were befuddled, not understanding what meaning was there to Minister Xin's action.

The other shore was a saying within Buddhism; Buddhism had declined ten thousand years ago and was rarely mentioned by people, were the words from Minister Xin due to true anguish, or did it have some other implication?

"This fellow, when did he suddenly start to enjoy blurting out his worries?" said Tang Thirty-Six.

Jin Yu Lu couldn't control himself any longer, reprimanding him: "You idiot, this is blatantly the leaking of a topic."

"Eh?" Xuan Yuan Po's mouth was agape, wondering where the exam question was.

Chen Chang Sheng and Tang Thirty-Six exchanged a glance, thinking to themselves that adults really liked handling matters in unusual ways, for such an important matter, couldn't it have been stated in a clearer manner?

The Grand Examination was separated into three stages of: Academic Exam, Martial Trial and Duelling. The special attention directed towards Orthodox Academy from the Education Board was primarily centred around Chen Chang Sheng, he had no

problems with the Academic Exam, while Duelling was dependent upon personal ability and didn't have any exam topics; therefore, Minister Xin's leaked topic had to be something related to the Martial Trial.

“Crossing a lake?”

Tang Thirty-Six walked to the lake's edge and stood upon the half-remaining boulder that had been shattered by Xuan Yuan Po, turning his gaze towards the opposing shore that was around 100 metres (~109 yards) away; he was slightly confused, stating: “This isn't difficult.”

“It's hard for me to cross alone.” Xuan Yuan Po turned to look at Chen Chang Sheng, stating: “But I can easily throw a stone across to the opposite shore.”

Chen Chang Sheng understood his meaning, but didn't reply, after a brief silence, he said: “I need to consider.”

The tree that had been destroyed by Xuan Yuan Po was too thick, making it difficult to chop into firewood. Jin Yu Lu was in a rare spate of enthusiasm, and instead, set the remaining half of the tree alight in its entirety, before suspending a black deer that been sent by Luo Luo from Li Palace over the flame; spit-roasting an entire deer was all about its opulence; its grease surrounded the place and the academy was soon veiled in its aroma.

Xuan Yuan Po stood beside the roasting deer, waiting for it to cook with an unblinking gaze; Tang Thirty-Six had a knife in one

hand and a plate in the other, his throat constantly going through the motions of gulping; only Chen Chang Sheng wasn't by the pyre, even though the Grand Examination was imminent, he hadn't let up in the slightest, strictly adhering to his principles; something as unhealthy as a deer roast, how could he possibly eat it?

He continued to race across the ground near the lake, relying upon muscle memory to convert positions of Discerning Steps into instinct; the topic leaked by Minister Xin did not pose a problem for himself, he currently had at least three different methods to cross a lake, but it would involve revealing his current abilities which would put him at a disadvantage for the Duelling stage, therefore he had to think of some other method.

After a long while, the deer had finished roasting, Xuan Yuan Po cried out to him from the opposite shore and he waved his hand a few times in reply, expressing that he really wasn't going to have any. After this, Xuan Yuan Po started tearing at the meat with his hands, while Tang Thirty-Six began using his knife to carve out some meat, Jin Yu Lu took out a bottle of fine alcohol that he refused to share with the two youths.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head, thinking to himself about what was so good about alcohol and meat, but... ox tongue was indeed rather tasty, while pondering on everything, he climbed up the great banyan tree and stood upon its foremost branch, gazing out towards the white houses and dark eaves of the Capital in the snow's aftermath, hands on his waist as he stood there silently for a long while.

The area surrounding the Capital, should currently be a snow plain that covered tens of thousands of miles.

Within his body, was also a snow plain that stretched for tens of thousands of miles.

It was possibly just under the palm of his hands.

The snow plain was comprised of Star Brilliance that could be converted into boundless amounts of True Essence.

Though he didn't dare to touch that Star Brilliance, just knowing of its existence was reassuring.

He was currently akin to some wealthy young master, in possession of a vast wealth, but had only a few taels upon his person; he didn't dare to open his baggage, which had banknotes worth hundreds of thousands stashed within, because the baggage also contained a devil, upon opening the baggage, this devil would also come rushing out.

A regular person, under these circumstances, would have probably gone into a frenzy long ago, yet he remained calm.

Having, was better than not having.

Having a weight upon the waist, even if it cannot be spent, was still something to be happy about.

He stood upon the branch, happily looking at the snow covered Capital.

Yet, the sealed well at New North Bridge continued to worry him.

At this moment, upon the faraway snow clouds, a streak of white mist suddenly appeared.

At the fore of this white mist was a glistening white crane.

Several clear cries came from the crane; the White Crane fanned its snow-like wings a few times, before resting upon the tree branch, causing it to dip slightly from the added pressure.

It had returned from the Southern Region's Longevity Sect, bringing with it a reply from Xu You Rong.

Chen Chang Sheng remembered that the letter he had written to Xu You Rong was sent a long time ago, and couldn't understand why did it take this long for a reply, yet he was curious as to its contents; was it just a simple: "don't misunderstand", or perhaps: "take care of your own affairs", or maybe even some money?

Admittedly, that last thought was overly spiteful, she was probably not the sort to do so.

Taking the letter from the White Crane, he opened it and began

reading, then remained silent for a long while.

Within the letter, Xu You Rong mentioned the Ivy League gathering and expressed congratulations towards him; she mentioned the Grand Examination and expressed good wishes towards him; she mentioned that the Nan Xi Institute had matters that needed handling, therefore she wouldn't be travelling to the Capital for the Grand Examination, thus, Chen Chang Sheng's request for a discussion in person was something she could not acquiesce to.

Finally, she mentioned the White Crane, asking what had he done, to cause the White Crane to treat him so familiarly; she also said not to misunderstand, that she was only curious and did not have anything else in mind; she also mentioned that she had heard he wanted to place first upon the First Banner and that it wasn't her place to give an opinion, but that he should take care of his own affairs.

Well.

Don't misunderstand, take care of your own affairs.

Both of these phrases were included.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head and crumpled the letter into a ball, preparing to throw it below, into the gaps between the ice that had been created by Xuan Yuan Po's destruction, the White Crane glared at him however, prompting him to stow the crumpled letter away into his clothing.

Thinking upon the topics touched upon in Xu You Rong's letter, he felt gratitude towards the White Crane and affectionately petted its neck.

He suddenly had a thought and said to the White Crane: "Can you stay in the Capital for a few more days?"

Winter had only just passed and Spring had yet to properly resurge upon the land, peeping out from the walls of the Capital's streets and alleys were plum blossoms, rather than peach; between the branches were only buds of green and leaves were yet to fully form, akin to the morning dew, the world was still enshrouded within a hazy green.

The Grand Examination commences.

Chapter 129 – The Youths Standing Before The Sun

The Mausoleum of Books was located in the Capital and the Capital was the heart of the Zhou Empire, the heart of humanity's realm; perhaps, even the heart of the entire continent.

Only through the Grand Examination or those few with special privileges, had the right to enter the Mausoleum and contemplate The Way. Thus, the Grand Examination was the world's most important event, more so than the Grand Meeting of Zhu Shi that happened once every three or five years.

This year's Grand Examination was being held at Li Palace as usual; early morning, before the stone pillars of Li Palace, there was already a gathering of the masses numbering in the thousands and above.

Peddlers were selling snacks such as nuts, seeds and fruit; baked goods and meat; and some were even selling benches. Under careful observation however, you would notice that peddlers selling water were the most numerous.

Citizens of the Capital could spectate the Grand Examination every year and were used to its schedule, most of them were currently home, while the masses currently gathered here were from various parts of the continent and solely here for merriment, one could only imagine how things would look once the Grand Examination properly started; with everyone congregated outside of Li Palace, that scene would be extremely festive.

Students that were participating in the Grand Examination had arrived earlier than the spectators. Before the stone pillars of Li

Palace, a section, tens of kilometres wide had been cordoned off, brimming with carriages. Under the light of dawn, teachers from the various schools were busy giving their last words of advice to students, while some students had their eyes shut and were resting their thoughts.

Sectioning off this area from the masses that had gathered for merriment was a long yellow tape, made of silk; logically, this taping should not have been enough to keep the masses away, nor should it be able to stop peddlers from naturally trying to occupy prime locations for the peddling of their wares, yet the strange thing was, neither the masses nor the peddlers dared to attempt crossing the cordon.

This was because hundreds of court officials and imperial guards were stationed around the outer perimeter of the cordoning, with stern expressions on their faces. More importantly, at the end of the cordoning was a carriage that was drawn by a Black Rhinoceros, everyone on the continent knew of only one carriage that was drawn by a Black Rhinoceros and that the carriage would always only have a single passenger: His Grace, Zhou Tong, from the Ministry of Personnel.

Disciples from the Southern Domain arrived the earliest.

Disciples from all branches of the Longevity Sect were in attendance; Gou Han Shi and the three other disciples from Li Mountain stood at the front with calm expressions, as if today was like any other. With the rays of dawn shining upon their faces and a morning breeze fluttering their garments, they exuded a feeling of relaxed confidence that captivated the gaze of countless eyes.

Many sects under the administration of Holy Maiden Peak had also sent disciples. The little junior sister that had been sent to tears by Tang Thirty-Six's words was currently standing amidst the gathered group; staring at the Li Palace complex under the morning rays, her tender face was filled with anxiety, a senior sister rubbed her head, before saying a few words to her whilst smiling reassuringly.

A young girl, wearing attire that indicated she was an outer circle disciple of the Nan Xi Institute, currently had her brows lightly crossed, giving the impression of someone that was under great stress. The Nan Xi Institute had two circles of disciples, split into an inner and outer circle; Xu You Rong was the sole disciple within the inner circle, while the outer circle had a number of disciples; the young girl had been chosen by her school to participate in the Grand Examination and thus, felt some degree of duty upon herself.

South of River Wang (Neglect), were innumerable sects, with a majority of them falling under the administration of the Longevity Sect or Holy Maiden Peak; these two schools were both sects from the Southern Domain and could be thought of as a single entity. The young disciples all stood in one place, occasionally speaking to each other in hushed tones; the disquiet they felt from being in a foreign place and the impending examination had decreased significantly.

There were, however, several disciples that were stood slightly adrift from the others, these young men wore green-coloured gowns (cheongsam) and had a scholarly aura; disciples from the renowned Scholartree Manor.

Positioned opposite to the disciples of the Southern Domain were the academies of the Capital and those who had passed the foundation trial of the Grand Examination, they stood at the Eastern section of the plaza, directly in line with the morning sunshine, and avoiding the cooler winds coming in from the West; the better location. Their numbers were greater than those opposite, to the point where all that could be seen were countless figures blotting out the view.

Zhuang Huan Yu had a detached expression on his face as he stood at the fore of the students from Heavenly Academy. Heavenly Academy was located in front of all the other academies, with Star Seizer Academy, Temple Seminary and the other Ivy League schools located behind. Amidst the quietness of this area, the endless chattering of students from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green was especially conspicuous; behind them stood regular students that had passed the foundation trial.

The Grand Examination only had Three Grades, and those considered to be the most promising were naturally students and disciples from these academies and sects. Students such as Heavenly Academy's Zhuan Huan Yu, Li Palace College's Su Mo Yu, two young officers from Star Seizer Academy and a senior from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green.

What people were most interested in however, was the First Banner.

Similar to the history of cultivation within humanity, the Grand Examination had its highs and lows, this year was obviously a

high, with competition at its fiercest. It must be known that the previous year's first place upon the First Banner had gone to the Third Law of the Divine State's Seven Laws, yet, if they were to participate in this year's Grand Examination, they might not even qualify for a position upon the First Banner.

This year, four of the Divine State's Seven Laws had come to participate; Scholartree Manor also had four participants, while Holy Maiden Peak had sent a talented female disciple. From the Capital, someone as proud as Zhuan Huan Yu had finally decided to stop biding his time, and strong figures such as Tian Hai Sheng Xue had also decided to choose this year's examination as the time for them to display their prowess.

Only cultivators from the younger generation of the yao race were absent, unknown as to if this was related to the presence of Her Highness, Luo Luo, in the Capital; though of course, this absence does not include a certain honest youth from Orthodox Academy.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue had never entered the Grand Examination before, because he had yet to complete his Ethereal Opening; he was not confident of being able to defeat the renowned Qiu Shan Jun to take first place upon the First Banner.

Qiu Shan Jun did not participate in the Grand Examination because it didn't interest him, Zhuan Huan Yu was of the same thought; perhaps, even the scholars from Scholartree Manor were of the same view and thus, none of them had participated in the Grand Examination until this year.

For all the prideful geniuses of the continent, their target had always been Qiu Shan Jun.

Yet lamentably, Qiu Shan Jun continued to remain absent this year.

They could wait no longer, the Mausoleum of Books had been awaiting their arrival for many years already, if they were to delay further on entering the Mausoleum and contemplating The Way, it could affect their future cultivation.

Since Qiu Shan Jun was not participating in this year's Grand Examination, expectations on whom would place first upon the First Banner this year, fell upon two: Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue; for the various leading gambling venues on the continent, their odds also reflected this view, while Zhuan Huan Yu and the scholars from Scholartree Manor were anticipated to have good chances for entering the First Banner.

A certain name that had become infamous, was intentionally being neglected by everyone; in discussions over prospects for the Grand Examination, very few would mention a certain academy.

As if they wished to affirm the views of everyone, the odds produced for the Grand Examination by the leading gambling venues had that name on the bottom of the list, with pay-out rates that bordered on absurdity, yet mysteriously, last night, the odds for first position upon the First Banner experienced a massive change, the pay-out rate for that name continuously fell, until it reached fourth place.

This year's Grand Examination was a gathering of talent, and

possibly the most competitive in the last decade, it also had countless topics of interest, such as that certain academy and that certain person. Yet sadly, the most anticipated Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong were absent, everyone knew that these two had the special privilege to enter the Mausoleum of Books whenever they wished, yet, had they also entered this year, it would have made for a spectacular event.

No one knew the reason for Qiu Shan Jun's absence from this year's examination, even his closest confidants and junior disciples, such as Gou Han Shi, did not know of his reason.

Logically, with his cultivation and ability, he should have participated in the previous examinations; the masses had thought that he wanted to wait for Xu You Rong, so that they may enter the Mausoleum of Books to contemplate The Way together. Everyone had assumed that Xu You Rong would be participating this year; could it be, that because she wasn't participating, Qiu Shan Jun also decided not to?

Why didn't Xu You Rong participate this year? Was it due to the proposal on the night of the Ivy League gathering? Or was it due to the betrothal that was decided on her behalf by her grandfather?

At this moment, a horse-drawn carriage passed through the yellow cordoning and arrived at the plaza.

The crowd that had gathered at Li Palace was suddenly abuzz with chatter; someone recognised the people that just arrived.

The youth that was walking at the back there, wasn't he the much-rumoured Chen Chang Sheng?

This plain-looking youth was the fiancé of Xu You Rong?

This youth wanted to take first place upon the First Banner?

Countless stares fell upon Chen Chang Sheng.

As if he hadn't detected anything, he followed the procedure Minister Xin had told him of: producing a roster and related documents for registration, then standing in the section that had been designated for Orthodox Academy.

Administration of the Grand Examination was handled by the Education Board; the positioning of designated areas was obviously also controlled by the board.

The position of Orthodox Academy was... at the front.

Ahead of Heavenly Academy.

Being directly under the rising sun; extraordinarily eye-catching.

Whether be it the gathered crowds or the youths from the South who were standing opposite, this location was conveniently exposed.

Convenient for gathered stares.

The plaza was momentarily quiet, with all gazes turned towards the three youths from Orthodox Academy.

Then, with a single rumbling, endless sounds of chatter erupted.

“I’ve heard that he hasn’t even managed to Purify, yet he wants to place first upon the First Bannner? What kind of joke is this?”

“That youth is the sole grandchild of the Wen Shui Tang family? How much money has Old Master Tang frittered upon him?”

“Who’s that barbarous looking brute? He’s only thirteen? Oh, so he’s just a yao race lout.”

Having Orthodox Academy positioned at the front, the most incensed were naturally students from Heavenly Academy; since Orthodox Academy’s ruin some decades ago, Heavenly Academy had been the undisputed leader of the Ivy League academies, who would have thought, that their usual positioning would be usurped by Orthodox Academy this year. Zhuang Huan Yu didn’t say anything, but a student from Heavenly Academy reprimandingly said: “They actually came late today?”

Tang Thirty-Six had intentionally groomed himself today; his green robe swaying in the breeze, ornamental jade buckles upon the waist, a paper fan in hand and an expressionless face; an indescribable sense of aloofness and pride.

He ignored his former fellow-student; lightly flourishing his fan and basking in self-feelings of elegance, he was suddenly

interrupted by a sound that came in from the side.

He turned around indignantly, using his fan to cover his nose and gave Xuan Yuan Po a stare while saying: “I told you not to eat so much, yet you wouldn’t listen; what’s so good about leftover venison?”

Xuan Yuan Po rubbed his chest and said with some embarrassment: “I’ve heard that the Grand Examination can sometimes last for three days and three nights without providing any food, that’s just scary, not to mention, even though it’s been cold lately, the deer meat had been sitting for two days, leaving it for another day will cause it to go off; wasting food is not good.”

Upon hearing this exchange, the students that were nearby had some spectacular expressions on their faces.

The Grand Examination was near, yet these two brats from Orthodox Academy were still in the mood to discuss this type of matter?

Chen Chang Sheng was not in the mood for this type of discussion.

The countless gazes that were currently concentrated upon him, made him feel somewhat solitary.

He thought back to Xi Ning village.

He was currently feeling especially sensitive to stares.

He noticed someone that wasn't staring at him.

It was a youth.

The youth stood amongst the group from Star Seizer Academy, yet didn't wear the military-like attire of the academy.

The weather was chillingly cold, yet the youth only wore a single piece of clothing, and even had their sleeves rolled up, with their small arms exposed to the cold breeze.

At this moment, the gazes of everyone at Li Palace were directed at Chen Chang Sheng, yet that youth had their gaze upon the distant sun that was about to break out from the horizon.

Within that sea of people, the youth seemed extremely solitary.

Chen Chang Sheng suddenly felt that he and that youth were the same type of person.

Chapter 130 – The Academic Exam Begins

The youth was rather skinny, but not to the point of being emaciated; the body beneath that flimsy clothing seemed to have substantial amounts of hidden strength.

He had his eyes squinted as he gazed upon the rising sun, a look of yearning, yet trepidation; fearing to get close, and thus keeping their distance, akin to Chen Chang Sheng's attitude towards the flamboyance of this world.

The rising sun gradually broke through the clouds upon the horizon, appearing before everyone present.

Everyone was still staring at Chen Chang Sheng, babbling away; "I've heard he hasn't even completed his Purification, with what is he going get first place on the First Banner?"

Gou Han Shi's brow lightly twitched, he felt that today's Chen Chang Sheng was slightly different from when they last met at the divine avenue, yet he couldn't tell what had changed.

Mao Qiu Yu was not required to stand in line like the other students and teachers, he sat upon the observation platform of Li Palace and gazed at Chen Chang Sheng, thinking to himself: "He actually succeeded in his Purification, but why does it feel slightly different?"

Chen Chang Sheng wanted to ask Tang Thirty-Six if he recognized the lonely looking youth that was standing amidst the

students from Star Seizer Academy, but Minister Xin had arrived.

“You have to win.” Minister Xin said to him keenly, as he patted him on the shoulder.

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly confused, over the past few days, Minister Xin had visited Orthodox Academy multiple times, yet he had never said those words, only seeking to help relieve some of the pressure he might have felt, why did he choose to say those words today, with the Grand Examination about to commence?

“I’ve bet my entire fortune on you winning,” said Minister Xin. “If you fail to take first place upon the First Banner today, then you have to remember to collect my corpse from the River Luo tomorrow.”

Under these circumstances, if Chen Chang Sheng were to fail at obtaining first place, the one most affected would not be Orthodox Academy, but the Education Board that had supported the academy; were the Education Board to falter, Minister Xin’s future would be a bleak one, thus, he had logically placed all his assets on a bet for Chen Chang Sheng’s victory.

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t know what to say in reply, but Tang Thirty-Six answered: “No wonder last night had some big changes to the pay-out rate.”

The Wen Shui Tang family were loath to lag behind in monetary affairs, though they weren’t overly interested in the small sums involved with gambling on the Grand Examination, they

nevertheless kept a close eye on its developments.

Minister Xin replied: “Just my own personal wealth would not be enough to affect the pay-out rates of the gambling scene.”

They stared towards the ceremony platform, towards the biggest patron of Orthodox Academy.

There, His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, had his eyes lightly shut, indiscernible as to whether if he was sleeping or awake; no one knew how much had he wagered upon Chen Chang Sheng winning.

In the same way, no one knew how much had Mo Yu, who was currently seated beside him, had wagered upon Chen Chang Sheng.

That's correct, Lady Mo Yu believed in Chen Chang Sheng's ability to place first upon the First Banner, she didn't have any logical reason to believe this, but she still felt that he could achieve it.

The Grand Examination was separated into an Academic Exam, Martial Trial and Duelling Stage, the ordering of these phases was not fixed, and was decided each year as it commenced. For this year, the first phase was the Academic Exam, when this was announced five days ago, a lot of people speculated that this was the Education Board intentionally favouring Orthodox Academy, or more specifically, Chen Chang Sheng.

The Academic Exam was to be held at the Hall of Zhao Wen (Pellucid Edification), with some time to go before its initiation, Minister Xin lowered his voice and reminded the three youths from Orthodox Academy that for the Martial Trial, no matter how well their performance was in the Academic Exam, if they fail to complete the Martial Trial, they will not qualify for the Duelling Stage and their result will effectively be nothing.

Xuan Yuan Po nodded his head, thinking to himself that he could only choose that option. Chen Chang Sheng knew that this was a reminder to himself, that he should not spend too much time on the Academic Examination; the question of whether if he could pass the Martial Trial was the most important issue at hand, as for the Academic Exam, no one cared for its results, something attested to by the expressions on everyone gathered here, before the Hall of Zhao Wen.

A lot of stares were still directed at Chen Chang Sheng, but these stares were different from what he had experienced in the past or even just earlier, these stares did not carry any sense of doubt or mockery, they only had envy or a begrudging respect.

After the bout between Orthodox Academy and Li Shan Sword Sect at the Ivy League gathering, and the evaluations from the Council of Divine Ordinance when the proclamation was updated, there was no longer anyone who doubted Chen Chang Sheng's learning; the masses had found, much to their astonishment, that the younger generation, after Gou Han Shi, had once again produced a monster that had read the Scriptures in their entirety.

They didn't believe that Chen Chang Sheng could place first

upon the First Banner, but they did believe in his ability to challenge Gou Han Shi in the academic phase, to take the leading position. The large gambling venues of the continent reflected this view in their odds, with his pay-out rate being just behind that of Gou Han Shi, occupying second place.

The second peal rung out; the examinees entered the exam venue.

The Hall of Zhao Wen was vast, dozens of entrances opened at once and under the falcon-like gazes of Orthodox clergy and officials from the Ministry of Personnel, hundreds of people from the younger generation waded in; who knows who would soon soar upon the heavens akin to a dragon, or who would swim into the Zhou Empire's fishing nets, or who would be miserably caught by the falcons and fished out to be taken away.

A silencing array was activated, the Hall of Zhao Wen was designed to keep out the wind, with the use of a veil, only light could enter the Hall; the wind and rain, alongside other distractions, were kept at bay.

The space within the Hall was extraordinarily vast, filled with hundreds of desks, it still looked sparse. Each desk was separated by a good distance, and even though eyesight is much improved for those who have finished their Purification, the distance would make it difficult to spy upon answers from those nearby without someone noticing; not to mention the twenty-odd clergy who were at the Ethereal Opening realm or above, whom were tasked with continuously patrolling the venue.

The clergy started handing out the papers, and the examinees started reading them, the shuffling of paper arose at once, coinciding at one point, akin to the rushing sound of heavy rain.

Some did not read the paper, but instead started to grind their ink slabs to calm their mind, someone such as Tai Hai Sheng Xue.

Some were in a daze from boredom, someone such as Luo Luo; since her results were not going to be included, she was loath to bother expending energy on answering the questions. Not a moment later, a clergy member came before her desk, respectfully greeting her, before quietly whispering a few words. She then got up and followed the clergy member, probably leaving the exam venue for one of the side halls in order to rest.

Some had their eyes closed and were resting their thoughts, someone such as the youth Chen Chang Sheng had been secretly keeping his eye on.

Some, did what they needed to; if they needed to check the paper, then they checked the paper; if they needed to grind some ink, then they ground some ink; if they felt like observing someone, then they observed that someone; if they wanted to close their eyes and rest their thoughts, then they closed their eyes and rested their thoughts; if they felt thirsty, they asked for tea; if they felt sleepy, then they rubbed their eyes; akin to this day being like any other, someone like Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi.

Not intentionally forcing yourself to be calm is to be truly calm, truly confident.

The third peal rung out; the examinees started to move their brushes.

Chen Chang Sheng held his brush, not yet lowering it onto his paper, gazing upon the dark letters, he remained silent for a while.

From the Old Temple at Xi Ning, to the flourishing Capital; from being a young Taoist that was unknown to all, to being the focus of thousands; he had spent 10 months for this.

He started on his paper.

Nearby, Gou Han Shi started his.

Chapter 131 – The Final Two

The brush glided across the snow-white paper, similar to a person snaking across the desert. Occasionally giving out the scraping sound of brush on paper; occasionally silent as it smoothly drifted past.

The Hall of Zhao Wen was to akin to being filled with mulberry trees, nurturing countless silkworms.

Chen Chang Sheng grasped his brush and earnestly answered the questions on the paper, his brush didn't make any great movements, as he concentrated upon his writing, one stroke to one character, serious to the point of being rigid.

Due to being rigid, it looked nervous, but in reality he was feeling calm and unfettered; the countless works he had read since young, drifted across his mind, akin to leaves falling in the wind; seeing each question, he would choose one from amongst the falling leaves before writing down what was prescribed wherewithin. Questions that required greater consideration; those had yet to appear.

Having gone through a substantial portion of the questions, there had yet to be any that strayed outside the knowledge contained within the Scripture of The Way, the clergy who set the questions had yet to demonstrate knowledge beyond that of past forebears.

Gou Han Shi, who was situated nearby, lowered his brush and briefly massaged his wrist before continuing to answer the questions. His expression was calm and relaxed, akin to being back within the study at Li Mountain, revising and creating study notes.

The Hall of Zhao Wen was quiet within, only the sound of writing and the scuffling of scrolls could be heard, with the occasional cough arising from those who were nervous.

It was at this moment, that something unexpected occurred: someone handed in their paper early.

The one handing in was obviously not Gou Han Shi or Chen Chang Sheng; their brushes had only just landed upon paper and started writing; as the most hopeful examinees of the academic phase, wouldn't they at least answer all the questions in their entirety?

It also wasn't Xuan Yuan Po. Disqualification did not exist for the Academic Exam, thus, if this wasn't your forte, you could just give up on this part of the exam; this was something Tang Thirty-Six had told him and was something many teachers or elders from the various schools and sects had also told their students or disciples. The benefit of experience: if your results in the Martial and Duelling phases were to be exceptional, then even if you had no results in the academic phase, you could still enter within the Three Grades.

The handing in of papers early was something often seen for the Grand Examination, but for this year, people were still surprised: this was far too early.

The first person to hand in their paper was the youth Chen Chang Sheng had been keeping his eye on. This youth had not even

read the questions, or more specifically, the moment the paper had been placed upon his desk, he left his seat and took it towards the seating area for examiners.

He had effectively abandoned the test.

In past years, though there were many people like Xuan Yuan Po who would give up on this academic phase based on the advice of their elders and teachers, they would at least take into consideration the prestige of the Imperial Court and Orthodoxy by enduring for an hour before handing in their paper.

Yet this youth, without an ounce of hesitation, had abandoned the test the moment it had started, showing of a lack of thought for human relations. Fellow examinees gazed at his back in shock, with some showing an expression of glee, evidently gloating over the idea that he would have left a bad impression upon the examiners.

That youth walked up to the seating area for examiners and placed down his answer paper.

That thick stack of papers was obviously blank.

The examiners that had been appointed by the Imperial Court and Orthodoxy all stared at the youth in silence, the atmosphere was a little awkward.

One of the examiners broke the silence and said, “you are certain

that you wish to hand in your paper?”

The youth had delicate features, with a distinctive pair of brows that were very small and very flat, almost akin to looking at a straight line; strangely, this did not detract from his features, only giving the sense of someone that was cold and detached.

Upon hearing the question of the examiner, the youth continued to have an expressionless face, asking: “Not allowed?”

While saying those words, his eyebrows lightly twitched, showing some annoyance; it seems he disliked conversing with others.

His voice was cold like ice, the tone was flat like barren plains, spoken slowly, akin to having to throw out each word; it was as if he hadn’t spoken to anyone for a long time.

The clergy member lightly frowned, replying in a slightly unhappy tone, “According to the regulations of the Grand Examination, handing in your paper early is allowed, but...”

Not waiting for the clergy member to finish speaking, the youth said: “I’m handing it in.”

His words were still slow, the tone was still flat and his expression still cold. His intent was clear and firm: he wasn’t doing anything wrong.

The clergy member looked at the blank answer paper, but didn't say anything else; another examiner harshly reprimanded him: "You've already lost your chance of entering the Second Grade, anyone that had any sense of shame would feel disgraced right now, but for you to act in such a gloating manner, just what have your teachers been teaching you?"

The youth remained expressionless and didn't answer.

He did not have a teacher and had entered the Grand Examination in order to participate in the duels, he wanted to defeat everyone, especially that girl from White Emperor City, this was to affirm to himself that he was the strongest. As for the Imperial Court and Orthodoxy's selection of first place upon the First Banner, this did not interest him.

Shortly after, someone took the youth and left the Hall of Zhao Wen, leaving for the site of the Martial Trial.

The hundreds of examinees that were left, looked at the disappearing figure of the youth with complicated feelings.

Gou Han Shi could vaguely deduce the identity of the youth; his expression became a little sombre.

Zhuang Huan Yu's brow lightly twitched, his expression was still calm, but his eyes betrayed a sense of unease.

After an hour, examinees started handing in their papers.

These examinees were taken from the Hall of Zhao Wen and down the divine avenue, after walking for a long period of time, they arrived at the location for the Martial Trial: The Garden of Dawn.

The Garden of Dawn was a park located in the Eastern section of Li Palace, under the tranquil Spring season and clear scenery, greenery blanketed across like a sea of green. Countless trees dotted the landscape, birds could be heard chirping in the morning, flowing streams seen in twilight; the scene was extremely beautiful. With the remnants of Winter fading and the buds of Spring sprouting, the earth was still covered in hints of brown, yet this did nothing to detract from its allure.

What was the true purpose behind the Grand Examination?

Was it to help the Imperial Court and Orthodoxy acquire new talent? To set an appropriate barrier for entrance to the Mausoleum of Books? Its purpose did indeed coincide with these aims, but its true purpose was to identify and allow for the nurturing of true geniuses amongst the younger generations for the struggle against the demon race.

The individual battle strength of the demon race was far too strong, humans and yao could only rely upon numbers to make up for the difference, from a thousand years ago when it had first started, they had understood that it was only through nurturing more peerless experts, could they achieve a lasting advantage on the battlefield.

Upon the long path of cultivation, the Ethereal Opening realm was the most important hurdle that had to be passed.

By passing through this boundary, one would become a focal point of the human world, yet age was also an important consideration; an individual aged 30 who was in the late stage of the Meditation Realm was not as important an asset to the human world as someone aged 13 who was in the early stage of the Meditation Realm.

This was something easy to understand; even if you were to be able to reach the realm of Star Fusion at the age of 800 years, you would already be near the end of your time and will have no hope of entering higher realms of cultivation, what impact can you have in the war against the demon race?

Therefore, similar to the Rankings within Heaven, Earth and Humanity that were disseminated by the Council of Divine Ordinance, the Grand Examination focused upon the latent capability and talent of examinees: their future.

Talent and latent capability can be said to represent the same thing, but with the latter being more subjective; brought together, what is displayed will be their capability.

The Martial Trial was the phase that allowed for one to most directly achieve their goal using their own method.

For geniuses such as Xu You Rong and Luo Luo, their bloodline talent was something inborn, it wasn't something that could be scrutinised, but its strength could be demonstrated. Firstly, the strength of divine sense, this decided the distance of one's Fated Star and the short-term progress of cultivation. Secondly, the quantity of True Essence, this was related to the diligence and ability of the cultivator to perceive Heaven and Earth.

The examinees, under the guidance of leading Officials, crossed the Garden of Dawn and arrived at the easternmost region of Li Palace, they didn't see the youth who had handed in his paper the earliest, only seeing a thicket of evergreens that were about the size of two people in height that had been trimmed tremendously straight. Some of the examinees that were from the Capital knew of the origins of these copious green woods; finally understanding that this year's Martial Trial was this topic, they inadvertently let out a silent wail within their hearts.

Let us switch from these examinees who were currently in the Martial Trial and their current predicament, and instead return to the Academic Exam that was still ongoing within the Hall of Zhao Wen.

Some students currently had brush tips grinding against their teeth, faces pale, akin to being on the verge of fainting; some students, under the cold Spring air, had faces full of sweat and steam rising from their bodies, giving the current scene an indescribable sense of tension.

This year's questions were too difficult, encompassing too broad a knowledge area and requiring too deep an understanding, far surpassing those of previous years. No matter how much they racked their brains, there was a limit to their endurance; there were constantly examinees who had lost in the battle against the question setters, handing in their answer papers early, followed by the sounds of crying emanating from the Hall of Zhao Wen.

An increasing number of gazes from the examiners and clergy fell upon Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng, yet it seemed as if they were unaware of these gazes; they continued on their answers,

their brushes unceasing in their motion.

Through the passage of time, the Hall of Zhao Wen came to have just over ten people remaining, most of the positions had already been cleared, making the hall ever more empty, deserted. For those remaining, they had already given up on answering the last few questions and were beginning to check their answers for mistakes; Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng continued with answering the questions.

The early Spring Sun, rose from the horizon to a zenith, the numbers remaining in the Academic Exam increasingly dwindled, even Tian Hai Sheng Xue and the four scholars from Scholartree Manor had already handed in their answer papers; Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng continued to silently work on their answers, they had already reach the final page of the questions.

The examiners and clergy within the hall could not sit still any longer; one-by-one they left their seats, holding their tea as they approached the exam area; fearing that they might disturb the two of them, they didn't get too close, but remained at a distance. Observing this scene that would rarely appear within the Grand Examination, none of them let out a single sound, yet their expressions became increasingly spectacular.

For these past years, no one had managed to answer all the questions in their entirety for the Academic Exam. The reason for this was due to the question setters being elderly clergy from Li Palace that concentrated on studying classics of The Way. These elderly clergy members might have had unremarkable cultivation, and little in the way of political power, but a lifetime

under books had given them vast knowledge and it had become customary for them to set the hardest possible questions for the last few as a proof of their worth; these questions would have been difficult even for the question setters to answer unassisted, let alone the examinees.

Gou Han Shi was renowned for having read the Scripture of The Way in its entirety; Chen Chang Sheng currently also had the same accolade; perhaps this had incurred the wrath of these elderly clergy members of Li Palace, causing this year's questions to be far more difficult than usual, especially the last few questions, which were difficult and abstruse to the extreme, akin to wanting to humiliate Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng.

The examiners and clergy were well aware of this, seeing that both Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng had managed to reach the last page and would be able to answer all the questions in their entirety, they were naturally astounded.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue had already handed in his answers, and was standing by the doorway of the hall, he turned around to glance at the two who were currently still answering the questions and quietly frowned. As the most promising successor to the Tian Hai family, he had never let up on the demands he had set for himself, yet those last few questions were far too difficult; he didn't understand how Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng could continue answering, was the gap in knowledge really that great?

The scholars from Scholartree Manor also handed in their papers, logically speaking, they should have felt suitably proud for this, but seeing the remaining two, calmly holding their brushes,

they couldn't bring themselves to feel this. They were not surprised with Gou Han Shi being able to continue for this long, he was renowned for his learning; but they were certain that Chen Chang Sheng would be unable to answer the last few questions and that he was currently just refusing to give up due to conceit, this caused their faces to inadvertently reveal a sneer of contempt.

An unknown amount of time passed.

Silence within the Hall of Zhao Wen was interrupted by the scuffling of a sleeve against tables and chairs; the sounds of discussion faintly began to rise, unable to be suppressed any longer; it emanated from the eastern side.

Gou Han Shi had finished his answers, standing himself.

At almost the same time, from the western side, came the sound of table and chairs being moved, the sound of papers being tidied.

Gazes turned towards that direction, only seeing Chen Chang Sheng clasp his paper to his chest, preparing to hand it in.

Silence once again descended upon the hall.

Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng were separated by a distance of 30 odd metres (40 odd yards), they quietly observed each other, before lightly bowing and exchanging formal greetings.

This was the first time they had caught sight of each other since

the first peal of the bell, though of course, they both knew that the other was present.

The Academic Exam has ended, the silencing array outside of the hall was dispersed and sounds came in like waves.

The masses that had come to see the Grand Examination were confined to a faraway location, yet their clamour could still be heard at the examination grounds, it did not take much to imagine how lively it currently was.

The masses who were here to participate in merriment already knew of the details to the Academic Exam, they knew that Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng were the last to hand in their papers and that they had actually managed to answer all the questions. This caused unbridled elation amongst them and calls of joy to arise; two youths that had read the Scripture of The Way in its entirety, handing in their papers at the same time, the image of this was just too captivating.

Gou Han Shi was famed across the world and the favourite for taking first place in the academic phase, he was deeply respected by everyone, but alas, he was also from the Southern Domain. Chen Chang Sheng had managed to offend all the youths in the Capital due to his betrothal with Xu You Rong and the Autumn Rain incident, but he was indisputably from the Zhou Empire, in a time such as this, he had become a representative for the citizens of the Capital, a source of pride for the people of Zhou, causing some of the spectators to actually cheer for him.

Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng couldn't clearly hear what

was being said by the masses; they received towels from the attending deacons, soaked them in the basins provided and wiped their faces and hands. After cleansing themselves they followed the officials and left the Hall of Zhao Wen, this was clearly a privilege exclusive to the two.

Reaching the evergreen tree in front of the divine avenue, Gou Han Shi turned towards Chen Chang Sheng and asked: “The Zhou though ancient, its fate is as such. What did you think of this question?”

Chapter 132 – The Dallying Forest

Chen Chang Sheng felt slightly startled, no matter from what angle this was looked at, this topic of discussion seemed to be inappropriate at this moment, yet Gou Han Shi had brought up the subject very casually. He had never harboured any ill-feelings towards Gou Han Shi and the current casualness from the other party only further relaxed him.

After considering for a while, he informed him of his answer.

“I also believe that it’s probably referencing the line of thought touched upon by Sir Song in his lecture at Lian Creek, but the order I can remember seems to be slightly different from yours.”

Gou Han Shi said in reply, telling of his own answer.

The two of them compared their answer for a time, discovering that, just as they had during the Ivy League gathering, that the difference in their knowledge originated from the revisions enacted by the Orthodoxy in the year 1581. The Classics studied by Chen Chang Sheng were old versions that hadn’t been edited, while Gou Han Shi had studied the edited versions that were approved by the Orthodoxy; one had the advantage in preserving the original meaning, while the other had the advantage of greater clarification, making it difficult to determine which could be considered more accurate.

Though it was only early Spring, the divine avenue was already lined with green trees that provided shade from the sun, a rather serene scene.

Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi continued walking under the shade while discussing the exam they had just finished, their voices were low and they did not enter any heated arguments, it was a very calm debate. This gave the type of feeling people would imagine to occur from an encounter between two experts, without the insincere idea of refinement in agreement; there were only two seekers of knowledge here.

After a short distance, from the small pavilion ahead that was located beside the stream behind the trees, the figure of Luo Luo appeared.

Gou Han Shi greeted her.

Luo Luo returned the greeting, before hugging Chen Chang Sheng's arm and asking him in a concerned tone: "Are you tired Sir?"

She did not enquire as to how did Chen Chang Sheng perform on the test, this was partially due to Gou Han Shi's presence, but also due to her confidence in his ability.

"I'm not tired."

Chen Chang Sheng massaged his wrist and asked: "When did you leave the Hall of Zhao Wen, I didn't see you there?"

Luo Luo tugged at his arm and answered: "I didn't answer any of the questions, I've been here drinking tea."

She did not need any results, thus, she didn't waste any energy on the Academic Exam and had been waiting at this pavilion for Chen Chang Sheng to finish handing in his paper and come out. Chen Cheng Sheng felt puzzled, if this was the case, why did she expressly request His Holiness, The Pope, for permission to enter the Grand Examination?

Gou Han Shi understood her intention, giving Luo Luo a glance, he felt wistful about Chen Chang Sheng's fortune and providence. He gave a formal gesture of parting, indicating that he was going to leave first.

Entering the Garden of Dawn, the park had a vast expanse of grass, with the woodlands situated a distance away, there was no longer any shade from the sun.

Luo Luo had managed to acquire an umbrella from some unknown place and used it to shade Chen Chang Sheng from the sun.

Seeing this scene, the examinees that were stood before the evergreen thicket had awkward expressions upon their faces.

For Her Highness to attend to you as such, aren't you afraid of shortening your lifespan from this type of degeneracy? This was the thought going through many of their minds at this moment.

Chen Chang Sheng had gotten used to this type of attention from Luo Luo during their time together at the academy and thus, did

not feel anything untoward about the situation, but under the stares of the other examinees, he quickly came to his senses, retrieving the umbrella from Luo Luo's hand before taking her to the evergreen thicket, to listen to the lector from Temple Seminary explain the rules of the Martial Trial.

The examinees that had handed in their answer papers early had already entered the vast evergreen forest and currently, before the woodlands, there were only 20 odd examinees waiting, comprising of Chen Chang Sheng, Luo Luo, Gou Han Shi, the four scholars from Scholartree Manor, Tian Hai Sheng Xue and some others.

Hearing the lector's explanation, Chen Chang Sheng finally knew that the evergreen forest was actually a labyrinth. The evergreen shrubs that had been trimmed extraordinarily neatly, were akin to countless barricades that separated numerous different paths. The first half of the Martial Trial was to have examinees successfully traverse these trees, those who couldn't complete the task within 2 hours would be disqualified.

Looking at the stern expressions upon everyone's faces, with some displaying dismay, Chen Chang Sheng felt a little confused. The Capital had many parks and gardens which contained similar labyrinths that even little children could complete, even if this forest was exceedingly vast in size and its design was to be a little more complex, it couldn't possibly compare with the difficulty of the Academic Exam?

“This forest is called the Dallying Forest.”

Luo Luo knew that though he had read the Scripture in its

entirety, he had little familiarity with many things that were common knowledge. She explained to him in a low voice: “It’s said that this was originally used by Wang Zhi Ce as a recreational game to relax when studying, while he was at the Capital. At the time he had used a brush and paper, but as his designs became increasingly complex, it became increasingly difficult to complete.”

She continued: “Many years later, the reigning Pope of the time felt that this game was useful for tempering the minds of young people and could also be used to test the strength of someone’s divine sense, therefore, an evergreen forest was constructed in the Garden of Dawn, according to the design.”

“It’s difficult?” asked Chen Chang Sheng.

“Wang Zhi Ce named this game ‘dallying’; due to its difficult nature, it could squander away all your time,” explained Luo Luo.

Something that was considered difficult by a legendary figure like Wang Zhi Ce could only be truly challenging.

Chen Chang Sheng considered for a while before asking: “Many of the solutions used by Wang Zhi Ce should have been disseminated, why haven’t I have seen any of them recorded in any books?”

Luo Luo answered: “Wang Zhi Ce used brush and paper, but relied upon calculation and planning, for something he considered to be a minor recreational game, he didn’t bother recording it in his notes, therefore, his solution remains unknown.”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the never-ending trees and said: “Using a brush and paper, you can sketch out innumerable designs in a short period of time; with the design becoming something this vast, a person traversing it cannot possibly match the speed of sketching on paper, to find a solution within 2 hours is indeed difficult.”

“That’s why your divine sense has to be strong enough.”

Luo Luo looked at him and carefully said: “Using the divine sense as a brush, the stronger your divine sense is, the farther you can perceive, this is the equivalent of being able to sketch farther ahead; being able to evaluate this quicker.”

“So this is a test of the divine sense and ability to perceive, I think... there shouldn’t be any problems.”

Thinking of his distant Fated Star, Chen Chang Sheng felt confident, but he suddenly thought of something and asked: “There is only a single correct path?”

If there was only a single correct path, then examinees that couldn’t use their divine sense to determine the correct path could still resort to following others.

“According to the calculations and estimates done by His Holiness in his youth, this forest has more than 4,000 entrances, and over 700 exits. There are at least 3,927,400 different solutions, or more specifically, routes. If an examinee was to successfully

solve this quandary through one of the routes, then anyone unlucky enough or shameless enough to be on the same route, would regrettably have to start over again.”

The lector from Temple Seminary looked at the examinees and said: “Please choose your individual entrances.”

At that moment, one of the young scholars from Scholartree Manor asked: “It should be fine as long as the route taken is different, therefore, can we enter from the same entrance and split up once we reach a farther location?”

The lector’s eyebrow lightly twitched as they answered: “That is not allowed.”

According to the regulations for this year’s Martial Trial, only examinees that manage to pass through this forest would have the right to participate in the final duelling phase, anyone that failed would be directly disqualified, while the first to pass this stage would be rewarded with an advantage in the duelling phase.

An important rule was that the Martial Trial had to be completed alone – the Grand Examination intentionally sought to break down the barriers between the various schools and sects and recruit them into the folds of the Imperial Government or Orthodoxy, therefore, it naturally forbade the various schools and sects from acting together; this was an evident distinction from the Grand Meeting of Zhu Shi.

Scholartree Manor is a famous school from the Southern Domain that frequently participated in the Grand Examination and Grand Meeting of Zhu Shi, it couldn’t have been unaware of this rule.

The words of that scholar were obviously directed at someone else.

While he had spoken those words, his gaze was on Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo.

Chapter 133 – Listening To Waves From The Sea Of Trees (1)

The scholar from Scholartree Manor was slightly rotund in shape and his face was sickly pale, it seems he wasn't used to exposing himself to the sun. In his exchange with the lector from Temple Seminary he had kept his gaze on Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo, he maintained an expressionless face, but the edge of his lips faintly lifted, indicating that he was giving a warning and ridiculing them.

Chen Chang Sheng felt that these people were thinking far too much, shaking his head he decided to ignore it. He patted Luo Luo's hand to indicate that she should choose her entrance. Luo Luo had indeed wished to help him in the martial phase, being obstructed made her feel rather cross and she coldly glared at the scholar from Scholartree Manor.

The scholar from Scholartree Manor, upon thinking of Luo Luo's status, immediately began having feelings of regret, yet, words that have left the mouth cannot return, so he instead placed his hands behind his back and feigned the persona of someone that had righteously spoken out in the name justice.

After the instructions from the lector had finished, the twenty odd examinees began spreading out, following along the perimeter of the forest to look for entrances; this sea of trees was certainly as vast as any regular sea, making it impossible to capture its entirety within one's sights and thus, impossible to determine as to which entrance would grant the best advantage; you could only rely upon intuition or luck for the choice.

Chen Chang Sheng had never been one to believe in intuition or fate and decided upon the entrance closest to himself; Luo Luo unhesitatingly chose the entrance next to it. His choice was entirely arbitrary and Luo Luo had followed suit, examinees that saw this couldn't help feeling envious and wistful.

It didn't take long for the examinees to finish choosing their entrance points, at this moment, several dozen clergy members from Li Palace suddenly appeared with brush and book in hand and started recording the name and school of examinees within, alongside the current time; this was to represent their starting time for the Martial Trial.

None of the examinees rashly rushed into the Dallying Forest – a labyrinth designed by Wang Zhi Ce couldn't possibly be rushed through by blind luck. The examinees stopped outside of the evergreen forest, with some sitting down upon rocks on the edge of the path, some leaning against available trees, whilst others decided to directly sit on the ground; no matter what their choice was, they all closed their eyes and began meditating, beginning to spread out their divine sense.

Only two didn't have their eyes closed.

Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue stood outside of the forest area, silently gazing at the sea of trees, unknown as to what they were contemplating.

Twenty odd divine senses drifted towards the Dallying Forest, some strong, some weak, with faint traces of different presences within – individual differences in divine sense was something only

experts at the realm of Star Fusion and above could roughly distinguish, even someone like the lector from Temple Seminary wasn't able to discern the difference through perception alone.

The lector and several clergy members from Li Palace that had come to keep records all had their gazes focused upon Chen Chang Sheng, the same way the examiners had during the academic phase.

Chen Chang Sheng, who had declared his intention to place first upon the First Banner was the focal point of the exam today, favourites such as Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue, in contrast, did not garner much interest; they were strong cultivators that had already passed into the Ethereal Opening realm, while Chen Chang Sheng remained an unknown element.

Everyone in the Capital knew that up to 10 days prior, Chen Chang Sheng had yet to successfully complete his Purification, but how strong was his divine sense? Had he determined his Fated Star? If he had successfully determined his Fated Star, then why has he been unable to complete Purification? Did this not suggest that his divine sense was pitifully weak?

Everyone was very interested in how far he could progress in the Grand Examination; could he complete this Dallying Forest? It would at least allow him to avoid disqualification in this martial phase.

The thought of disqualification had never crossed the mind of Chen Chang Sheng, especially after gaining information on this year's topic.

He sat near the edge of the forest on a drooping Cloud Pine, legs crossed, eyes closed, fists loosely overhanging; his divine sense had already left his body, entering the sea of trees.

The barriers that were created by trees and the pathways that densely crisscrossed between, through the perception of his divine sense they became a vague pattern within the sea of his consciousness; the scenery before him that existed in reality had changed in colour, becoming distorted. Ordinary people seeing this scene would find it very mysterious, but for cultivators, to reform this into an image matching reality was not difficult.

Especially for those who had a strong and stable divine sense.

Chen Chang Sheng's divine sense was extremely stable and strong, otherwise, his Fated Star would not have been located in such a faraway location and Luo Luo would never have climbed over the walls of the Hundred Herb Garden to look for him at the academy.

He closed his eyes and used his divine sense to perceive the paths within the Dallying Forest, it did not take long for him to finish investigating this sea of trees.

It had to be said that the planning behind the Grand Examination was well thought out. Using divine sense to perceive this sea of trees was something very similar to the process of searching for a Fated Star and introspective meditation; from the perspective of the topic setter, it evidently indicated that an examinee had to be

at least in the Meditative Realm in order to pass through this forest.

Chen Chang Sheng suddenly had a thought; Wang Zhi Ce had often played this game alongside his studying, did he use it as a method to train his divine sense? It was well known on the continent that Wang Zhi Ce did not have a particularly strong divine sense, otherwise he would not have only started on the path of cultivation in his middle-age.

His divine sense drifted within the sea of trees, at the same time, many other divine senses were also acting similarly. He could nebulously sense the existence of these other divine senses, but had no method of interacting with them, as he continued probing the forest, he discovered more presences, it seems a lot of examinees were still entangled within the Dallying Forest.

The scholars from Scholartree Manor had their brows locked in a frown as they meditated with their eyes closed. Other examinees were in a similar state, with slightly pained expressions – only by examining the forest in its entirety could you form an image of the design in your mind, only through this could you begin to analyse the route that should be taken – for these youthful cultivators that had limited experience, it was a difficult task.

At this moment, Gou Han Shi began heading towards the forest, Tian Hai Sheng Xue started momentarily after; they soon disappeared amidst the budding green growth of Spring.

The Ethereal Opening realm was indeed on a different level.

The Hall of Zhao Wen was very quiet.

Upon the ending of the Academic Exam, major figures such as His Eminence, The Archbishop; Mo Yu; Prince Chen Liu; Mao Qiu Yu and several others, arrived at the Hall of Zhao Wen.

There were constant reports on the Martial Trial coming in, carried by the clergy of Li Palace; Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue entering the forest did not elicit any sort of reaction from those present; the Ethereal Opening realm should at least be capable of this. In their eyes, the two had been rather overly cautious.

At the moment Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue entered the forest, an examinee exited, completing the first half of the Martial Trial.

This person was Liang Ban Hu, the Divine State's Fifth Law.

This was equally unsurprising to the major figures in the Hall, they had a familiarity with ability of participants in this year's examination; discounting Gou Han Shi, the other three youths from Li Shan Sword Sect were very noticeable in strength, for someone amongst them to be the first to leave the Dallying Forest was very reasonable. Prince Chen Liu asked with some curiosity: "What about Guan Fei Bai?"

The next person to leave the Dallying Forest wasn't Guan Fei Bai, but... Zhuang Huan Yu.

This finally caused a stir within the hall, gazes turned towards Mao Qiu Yu and Prince Chen Liu gave a few congratulatory words. It was evident that Zhuang Huan Yu had not been neglecting his training for these past few years after defeating Qi Jian; from the strength of his divine sense, even though he had been demoted on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds to rank 11, he clearly had strength comparable to the top 10.

“Guan Fei Bai couldn’t place first; not even second at that, I wonder how angry should he currently look.”

The principal of Li Palace College said in a slightly mocking tone; the people of Zhou had long held ambivalent views on disciples from the Southern Domain’s sects.

The first half of the Martial Trial did not rank examinees on who could first leave the Dallying Forest, but was based upon the time they had spent traversing the labyrinth. The people gathered within the Hall of Zhao Wen had obtained records of starting times and knew that Liang Ban Hu, Guan Fei Bai and Zhuang Huan Yu started at the same time; having exited the forest, meant that Zhuang Huan Yu was in front of Guan Fei Bai.

At this moment, the principal examiner from the academic phase shook their head and said: “Liang Ban Hu was not first, Zhuang Huan Yu was not second, this means Guan Fei Bai will not even rank third.”

Li Palace College’s principal lightly frowned and said: “Are we to

include Gou Han Shi and young master Tian Hai?”

The principal examiner replied: “Before your arrival, someone had already left the Dallying Forest, his time was shorter than Liang Ban Hu by a third.”

Upon hearing those words, the people gathered here felt shocked, questioning gazes promptly followed, only The Archbishop, who was seated in the centre, continued to have his eyes closed, akin to someone that was asleep.

Someone had managed to finish faster than Liang Ban Hu, and to such an extent, how strong was their divine sense?

“Who was it?” asked Li Palace College’s principal in a shocked voice.

“Their registered name is Zhang Ting Tao (Listening to waves), though of course, we all know who this person is.”

The principal examiner looked towards the principal of Star Seizer Academy and mischievously said: “Though it is a fake persona, isn’t the name overly common?”

The principal of Star Seizer Academy had the bearing of a general of the Zhou Empire, without showing any sign of evasiveness, he replied: “He was willing to represent Star Seizer Academy, he can call himself whatever he likes.”

Everyone agreed with this in their minds.

“The wrathful Zhe Xiu...” said Prince Chen Liu rather forlornly, “I’m really curious as to how did he grow up.”

The principal of Li Palace College said: “I’m more curious about Chen Chang Sheng’s current status.”

Hearing those words, everyone’s gazes fell upon His Eminence, The Archbishop.

The principal examiner said: “Chen Chang Sheng’s results for the Academic Exam will definitely be exceptional, it’s only a matter of who will be first and who will be second between him and Gou Han Shi.”

Everyone present believed this to be the only natural possibility.

Li Palace College’s principal looked at His Eminence, The Archbishop, who was seemingly asleep and derisively said: “No matter how exceptional the result in the Academic Exam, if you cannot pass the Dallying Forest, it becomes meaningless. You would be directly disqualified and can’t even enter the Three Grades, let alone first place upon the First Banner. I wonder if someone would be able to continue sleeping so peacefully when that happens.”

The Hall of Zhao Wen was blanketed in silence, without anyone saying anything.

Within the Capital and the Orthodoxy, the principals of the six Ivy League schools had a unique position. For figures such as Mao Qiu Yu and the principal of Li Palace College, they had no need to fear anyone. Everyone within the hall knew that the principal of Li Palace College was a member of the new faction within the Orthodoxy and, like the Bishop of Temple Seminary, had close ties with the Tian Hai family.

His Eminence's declaration in place of Chen Chang Sheng was undoubtedly a major affront towards Li Palace College, Heavenly Academy and other similar schools. It was clear that the principal of Li Palace College was getting ready for a countermove; the moment Chen Chang Sheng failed to place first upon the First Banner, the Education Board and His Eminence, The Archbishop would suffer intense criticism and possibly even a direct offensive.

As with the words from before; to fail to even cross the Dallying Forest, what hope was there for placing first upon the First Banner?

Time slowly passed by and after an unknown amount of time, a clergy member entered the hall, reporting: "Chen Chang Sheng of Orthodox Academy has started to enter the forest."

Everyone present was surprised, the principal of Li Palace College arched his brow to the point where it seemed it might fly away, his eyes full of shock and doubt.

"How could he be faster than the group from Scholartree

Manor?”

Chapter 134 – Listening To Waves From The Sea Of Trees (2)

The Dallying Forest covered a vast area, but for a cultivator that had completed their Purification, this was a distance that could be crossed relatively quickly. The key to crossing this evergreen forest was dependent upon finding a correct path using one's divine sense, therefore, only those who were confident they could pass through the sea of trees would begin entering the forest – an examinee entering the forest would be an indication that they could exit, the only thing left to consider was how long they would take.

The report from the Martial Trial caused everyone in the Hall of Zhao Wen to feel shocked; Mao Qiu Yu picked up the time records and found that from the time when Chen Chang Sheng had first started to spread out his divine sense to his entering of the forest, the time taken was actually shorter than that of Liang Ban Hu's. Prince Chen Liu could also view the records from the side and said in an astonished voice: "Could Chen Chang Sheng's divine sense really be this strong?"

"If his divine sense really was this strong, why would he be unable to even Purify?" replied the principal of Li Palace College with an expressionless face; he did not believe in Chen Chang Sheng possessing such a strong divine sense.

Prince Chen Liu considered for a while and then answered: "From observing him previously, it seems he has completed his Purification."

Li Palace College's principal gave a cold laugh: "Even then, what of it? To take such a long period of time to succeed in Purification could only mean an average divine sense at best; it's more likely that that youth couldn't grasp the paths within the Dallying Forest, knowing that he wouldn't be able to pass, he decided to throw caution to the wind and take his chances in the forest itself."

The Hall of Zhao Wen once again became silent, for the words of Li Palace College's principal sounded reasonable – currently, amongst the hundreds of examinees that were inside the forest, there must have been a considerable number that had decided to enter after being unable to map out the entire forest while outside. Entering due to having no choice other than relying on luck to stumble upon a correct path; Chen Chang Sheng might have also made the same decision.

They all turned their gazes towards the one sat in the centre of the group, towards His Eminence, The Archbishop.

The Archbishop's eyes remained closed, as if he was sleeping and thus, deaf to their current conversation.

What followed, caused the principal of Li Palace College's face to quickly darken.

Reports from the forest constantly arrived at the Hall of Zhao Wen, with clergy members setting up a map to depict the present situation – a red mark indicated Chen Chang Sheng's current position; since entering the forest he had never stopped, constantly moving onwards; though the path taken wasn't straight, its direction could only lead forward; his consistent speed

further indicated his confidence and conviction.

As time passed, the red mark representing Chen Chang Sheng continued inexorably forwards, towards the outer perimeter of the forest. Tracing out a path that might have seemed complicated, but was actually one of the simplest routes; the hall became increasingly quiet, everyone looked at the remaining section of the path, though it was still obscure they understood that it shouldn't produce any difficulties.

Minister Xin, who had been standing outside of the hall, saw something that caused him to wipe away the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead and reveal a small smile.

The clergy continued bringing in the latest updates to the Martial Trial and that attention-grabbing red mark once again moved forwards, but this time, it had moved out of the Dallying Forest.

The Hall of Zhao Wen remained quiet, the Archbishop's eyes remained closed, not showing the least bit of concern.

The principal of Li Palace College was silent.

Prince Chen Liu musingly said: "This fellow's divine sense was actually this strong, who could have guessed?"

It was indeed unexpected for Chen Chang Sheng, who couldn't even complete his Purification, to have such a strong divine sense.

Mao Qiu Yu said: “After the Grand Examination, we need ask that child the process he went through to determine his Fated Star.”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement, since Chen Chang Sheng possessed such a strong divine sense, his Fated Star couldn't have been ordinary, this needed to be clearly documented for the glory of the Zhou Dynasty.

Receiving news on the Martial Trial a little later than the Hall of Zhao Wen, the masses that had gathered outside of Li Palace quickly came to know of the latest development; cheering erupted amongst them.

Hearing the faint sounds of cheering drifting in, Mo Yu turned to Prince Chen Liu and asked: “No one dared to wager upon Chen Chang Sheng being able to place first upon the First Banner; what would you say they are cheering for?”

Prince Chen Liu was momentarily stunned, understanding the logic behind her words, the joy that had briefly surfaced within him quickly dissipated.

Mo Yu laughed without saying anything.

None of the people gathered here had wagered on Chen Chang Sheng succeeding, yet, the reason for their jovial cheering was clearly because they all knew that he had no chance in the duelling phase. Since this youth from Orthodox Academy will not cause any of them to lose money, they naturally felt magnanimous enough to cheer for him.

Having exited the forest, he was greeted by a crisp, cool wind to the face, causing the slightly beleaguered Chen Chang Sheng to feel somewhat refreshed, as for the dumbfounded or perhaps shocked stares, he intentionally ignored them.

The clergy tasked with recording results for the trial and the examinees that were outside of the sea of trees could never have guessed that he would exit the forest this quickly – Chen Chang Sheng had used very little time in crossing the Dallying Forest, faster than even Liang Ban Hu, though it was yet uncertain as to who was faster out of him and the youth that had been registered as a student of Star Seizer Academy.

Turning back to gaze at the sea of trees, he thought back to his usage of divine sense while moving through the forest, he had thought he could vaguely make out the sound of surging leaves, drifting past in waves; he remained silent for a while.

The Ivy League gathering and Proclamation of Azure Clouds had proven that he wasn't trash, yet, being called knowledgeable, well-read, familiar with the Scripture of The Way in its entirety; in a world that revered strength, such descriptions were nothing more than empty words and phrases, dressed up to look attractive. This world still looked upon strength as the most important asset to have, or more specifically, strength that could affect life and death.

Today, he had proven to the world for the first time, that he possessed that type of strength.

But this wasn't enough, passing through the Dallying Forest was only the first half of the Martial Trial, he still had more to do in

order to enter the duelling phase.

Leaving the sea of trees and crossing a meadow, he arrived before a beautiful riverside in Spring.

The river was named the River Qu (Song/Melody/Crooked) and flowed through Li Palace before joining the River Luo.

In the Garden of Dawn, due to the flat landscape and several times of overflowing, this section of the River Qu was wider than the River Luo located in the Capital. The shortest distance between its shores was at least over 100 metres (~109 yards).

The waters of the River Qu were very calm, and deeply green in colour; for scholars and intellectuals, this would have perhaps inspired thoughts of poetics and arts, but for Chen Chang Sheng and most of the examinees, it was more akin to a copper mirror that had rusted over in green, a rather unpleasant sentiment.

The atmosphere of the observed, depends upon the observer's mood.

This year's Martial Trial for the Grand Examination really was well planned.

The first half had examinees cross a sea of trees.

The latter half had examinees cross a river in Spring.

As long as an examinee managed to cross this mirror-like river

that was over 100 metres wide and reach the opposite shore, they would have passed the Martial Trial, gaining the right to enter the Duelling Stage of the Grand Examination.

The trouble was, this wasn't so simple a task.

The rules made it very clear, apart from the soles of your shoes, any part of an examinee's body coming into contact with the river's waters would result in disqualification.

Chen Chang Sheng walked to the river's edge; gazing at the forest on the opposite shore naturally made him think of the lake at Orthodox Academy.

The other shore mentioned by Minister Xin, was the one opposite.

Chapter 135 – Treading Upon Thin Ice

Traversing the sea of trees and crossing the green river; the former tested an examinee's divine sense and perception, while the latter tested their True Essence capacity and utilisation. The trial might have seemed simplistic and frivolous at first glance, but in actuality, it was clear in its objective and criterion, the Grand Examination lived up to its reputation.

Leaving the Dallying Forest lead to the North-eastern area of Li Palace, the so called "other shore" referred to the Southern shore; how was one to reach it?

Chen Chang Sheng looked towards the riverside, towards the examinees that currently had heavy expressions upon their faces. He heard the footsteps of many people in the sea of trees behind him, some close, some far. He knew that many examinees wouldn't be able to leave the forest and more still that wouldn't be able to cross the river; it seems many were going to be disqualified in this martial phase.

He ignored the many weird stares that were falling upon himself, and silently stood upon a rock by the riverside. Gazing upon the meadow on the Southern shore and the indistinct figures that were currently situated at the pavilion near the woods there, he started contemplating something.

Liang Ban Hu, Zhuang Huan Yu, Guan Fei Bai and Qi Jian had all already crossed the river; he had exited the forest just in time to see Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue arriving on the Southern shore, but where was the youth that had been first to finish the

Academic Exam? Was he currently still in the forest?

Crossing the river directly, without the aid of any tools, wasn't something overly difficult for those with sufficient True Essence and skill in cultivation arts. But for the more common examinees, it was something exceedingly difficult.

Those who were confident, had immediately crossed over upon exiting the forest, the ones remaining on this side of the river were currently wavering in indecision.

At this moment, a student from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green came out of the forest, after listening to the rules she directly headed towards the River Qu without any hesitation.

With a gust of chill wind that descended from above; her skirt gently fluttering, akin to leaves dancing in the wind; she simply walked over to the other shore.

The examinees left on this side of the shore looked at this scene enviously while sighing, apart from its Sacred Art and its core secrets, the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green specialised in discipline arts that lightened the body and raised dexterity, but this type of discipline art, like the core secrets to Li Mountain's sword arts, was something they would never allow to leak outside of their own school.

The other examinees could only continue looking on in envy, while the more common examinees who would never have the chance to come into contact with such a high level discipline art became even more dejected.

A disciple from the Longevity Sect's Precipice of Violet Qi angrily said: "We all cultivate different discipline arts; this type of exam

isn't fair.”

The examiner replied: “As long as you can cross, you will pass, there's nothing that can be fairer.”

The disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi said: “So even if I was to bring the personal steed of my Sect's Elder and fly across while mounted, it will still count as passing?”

The examiner replied with an indifferent expression: “If you could, it'll be your ability.”

The disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi was speechless – there were many tools that could be used to allow a cultivator to fly for a short distance, but the rules for today's trial were very clear on banning their usage.

As for birds that could carry a person, these were extremely rare, apart from the Red Geese used by the military, most were the personal steeds of the various Sect's Elders; how could a mere disciple take one with them?

More importantly, topics of the Grand Examination were highly guarded, this year also had many differences from previous years, who would have thought of the need to bring a flying bird with them?

The student from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green effortlessly reached the opposite shore, this scene stirred envy from those present, but also caused the wavering examinees to gain some confidence and courage.

An examinee from the Northwest's Snowy Mountain Sect started their own attempt, they lowered their right leg upon the River Qu

and on contact, ice began forming underneath.

“Snowy Mountain Sect’s frigid qi is indeed impressive,” said an examinee in admiration.

The examinee from the Snowy Mountain Sect had a stern expression on his face as he carefully headed farther across the river, his left leg touched upon the river’s surface and another layer of ice immediately formed beneath his foot.

He slowly crossed the River Qu, ice forming beneath his feet, akin to snow lotuses slowly blossoming as he passed; extremely picturesque, yet, this gave observers a sense of apprehension as it was literally stepping on thin ice – at this point, no one dared to open their mouths, they all stilled their breath as they nervously observed, afraid that they might disturb this examinee’s crossing.

It didn’t take long for the examinee to reach a distance of over 100 metres, but at that moment, an infuriating wind descended from above, causing the examinee’s body to start swaying, he struggled for a moment to maintain control, but upon realising he wouldn’t be able to endure any further, he gave out a loud cry, gathered his energy and bounded for the opposite shore, creating ripples on the river surface that produced scattered sheets of thin ice.

Sadly, the examinee’s remaining True Essence was insufficient for supporting him and he sank into the waters of the River Qu with only a distance of 20 odd metres (~22 yards) left to the Southern shore.

Examinees that were observing this scene felt pity for his failure; it also once again greatly reduced the confidence they had for passing the Martial Trial.

An examinee from Star Seizer Academy started his attempt shortly after, directly mounting his sword and flying across the river. This did little to restore confidence to the other examinees. Flying on a sword might look rather gallant, but the requirements on True Essence and skill was proportionately high, amongst those who had successfully crossed the river, only the four disciples of Li Mountain and Zhuang Huan Yu had used this method.

On the Southern shore of the River Qu, a student from Star Seizer Academy and several other examinees from the Capital who were familiar with the examinee that had just crossed were waiting, they went up to congratulate them on their crossing.

With the passing of time, examinees continuously exited from the forest, but upon hearing the examiner's explanation for the rules to crossing the river, the joy they had felt at getting through the forest immediately dissipated.

At this moment, the crowd suddenly parted and the examinees all began movements of a formal greeting.

Luo Luo had arrived.

Luo Luo moved towards where Chen Chang Sheng was and said: "Sir?"

The look on her face indicated that she had a question.

Chen Chang Sheng answered: “Let’s wait for Xuan Yuan Po and Tang Thirty-Six first.”

Not long after, Tang Thirty-Six came out of the sea of trees; his green robes swaying, without a stray leaf in sight; feathered fan gently waving; a picture of refinement and solitary pride, but Chen Chang Sheng noticed the faint signs of annoyance upon his face, it was clear he had encountered some sort of incident inside the forest.

That was probably correct, Tang Thirty-Six was part of the second wave of examinees to leave the Hall of Zhao Wen, logically, he should have left the forest long ago.

“What’s wrong?” asked Chen Chang Sheng.

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “I met one of the scholars from Scholartree Manor in the forest.”

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly taken aback, the Dallying Forest was immensely large and had countless different routes, for two examinees to step upon the same path was extremely unlikely, he himself hadn’t met anyone else whilst inside of the forest.

“What happened after? Don’t tell me you ended up fighting after a squabble?”

Tang Thirty-Six replied with an expressionless face: “We obviously didn’t fight; firstly, there were examiners observing, secondly, I can’t necessarily see myself winning against that person; but for someone to dare to contend with this young master over a path, there naturally had to be a contest of words. Don’t worry, when it comes to arguing, I’ll never lose.”

Thinking back upon the Ivy League gathering where he and Luo Luo had humiliated Xiao Song Gong, Chen Chang Sheng didn’t doubt his ability to win an argument, conversely, he felt a little sympathetic towards the scholar from Scholartree Manor. But for Tang Thirty-Six to admit he couldn’t defeat that scholar from Scholartree Manor, this caused him to feel a little cautious.

At that moment, a scholar from Scholartree Manor came out from the sea of trees.

Shortly following this, the other scholars from Scholartree Manor also exited the forest.

The four of them gathered together and began discussing something in hushed tones before looking towards Orthodox Academy; one of the scholars had an angry expression on their face.

This scholar was evidently the one that got into an argument with Tang Thirty-Six, and had been punished by him through words.

Chapter 136 – Grasping The Hand

Fighting over a path was the easiest way to cause disputes and conflict, let alone during a time like the Grand Examination, where tensions were high, with the rules prohibiting examinees from taking the same route, someone would have to make the choice of choosing a new path – the Dallying forest covered a vast area, making it rare for two examinees to come across the same route, for Tang Thirty-Six to encounter that scholar from Scholartree Manor could be described as nothing else other than bad luck.

From the understanding Chen Chang Sheng and the others had of Tang Thirty-Six, the bad luck was definitely not Tang Thirty-Six's, and indeed, the reality was as such. In the end, it was the scholar from Scholartree Manor that was forced to choose a different route.

That scholar stared in the direction of Orthodox Academy, his face full of anger, wanting to go forth and argue with them; his fellow students stopped him, causing him to notice the presence of Luo Luo; he couldn't help letting out a few sneers.

The group from Scholartree Manor passed by the group from Orthodox Academy as they went towards the river, they used various methods, elegant to the extreme, to cross the River Qu; before leaving, they gave some mildly derisory glances towards Chen Chang Sheng's group.

At this time, Su Mo Yu had exited the forest, he went to the location of Chen Chang Sheng's group. For some unknown reason, this young expert from Li Palace College was not in his best condition today, the amount of time he took to complete the Dallying Forest was far longer than expected.

Tang Thirty-Six didn't like this prudish and stubborn person, but Chen Chang Sheng didn't feel overly averse to his presence; seeing his slightly pale face, he asked: "Is there anything wrong?"

Su Mo Yu replied: "I suddenly started getting signs last night of a breakthrough into the next realm. In forcibly suppressing it, my True Essence flow reversed, causing some shock to my sea of consciousness."

The young geniuses within the top 50 on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds were generally all at the upper stage of the Meditative Realm, if they wished to, they could have attempted breaking through to the Ethereal Opening realm at any time.

The barrier to the next realm was too high however, and the process of breaking through, too dangerous, therefore, without being fully prepared for this process, very few would choose to suddenly attempt the breakthrough.

Su Mo Yu was exceedingly diligent in his cultivation, and had come before the barrier long ago, due to the Grand Examination, he had been restraining himself, yet, he couldn't have expected that the signs of a breakthrough would appear just as the Grand Examination was imminent; what would have originally been a good thing had instead become a source of trouble.

Logically, this type of information concerning your own cultivation status should not be revealed to anyone else, not to mention that Orthodox Academy and Li Palace College were opponents, yet, for some unknown reason, seeing Chen Chang Sheng's sincere expression, Su Mo Yu naturally told him everything without too much consideration.

Tang Thirty-Six's expression relaxed, his thoughts towards him became a lot less belligerent – being trusted by someone, was a very pleasant feeling. He looked at Su Mo Yu and asked: “How long till you recover?”

Forcibly suppressing the signs of a breakthrough was something that could cause damage to the sea of consciousness upon even the slightest mistake; in the short-term, the sea of consciousness would become unstable, therefore, it was unsurprising that Su Mo Yu, even with his solid foundation and ability, would have spent so much time on the Dallying Forest. With sufficient time to meditate and rest your thoughts however, this type of condition shouldn't persist for too long.

“If I can last until the second round of the duelling phase, I should have recovered by then.”

Su Mo Yu did a formal hand greeting to the group from Orthodox Academy and then said to Chen Chang Sheng: “I will wait for you on the Southern shore.”

Upon finishing those words, he walked to the riverside, the outline of his body became mildly distorted as he initiated Li Palace College's wave riding art; his image gently swayed to and fro as he headed forwards; not taking long to arrive at the opposite shore.

Though his sea of consciousness was unstable, his True Essence capacity was unaffected and his cultivation art was sublime.

With the passage of time, more and more examinees exited the

Dallying Forest and made their way across the river; some of them arrived after much difficulty, while some fell into the river, requiring the clergy of Li Palace to bail them out of the waters.

The number of examinees standing by the riverside became increasingly few and Chen Chang Sheng's group of three became ever more conspicuous; conversely, the number of people on the Southern shore continued increasing; some of the examinees that had finished the Martial Trial much earlier, such as Gou Han Shi's group from Li Mountain, successively left the towers and pavilions they had been waiting in. They were preparing to observe something, but it was unknown as to what, presumably, it was something related to Orthodox Academy.

From amongst the evergreen trees that were approximately the length of two people in height, startled birds suddenly flew out, followed by the sound of breaking branches; the ground lightly rumbled, waves even started appearing upon the River Qu near the shore and dust abounded. An extremely stocky figure appeared from within the sea of trees that proceeded to violently rush out, their clothing full of tears from passing undergrowth and branches.

Xuan Yuan Po had finally passed through the Dallying Forest.

The yao youth's divine sense was fairly strong, otherwise, he wouldn't have been chosen by his tribe to travel to the Capital for studying, but he was lacking in training for the use of perception through divine sense, with his disposition being overly simplistic and his spatial thinking being relatively weak; it was easy for him to hunt prey in the mountains, but for him to complete a labyrinth devised by some intellectual, this was very difficult.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others had been worried about this, upon seeing him come out of the forest, though a little worse for wear, they felt glad.

Xuan Yuan Po ran over to them.

Chen Chang Sheng had helped him shave away his facial hair the night before, revealing the tender face beneath that was more fitting for his age, yet, at this time, whether due to his worrying or some other unknown reason, after just half a day, he had already sprouted a thin layer of stubble.

The stubble, alongside heavy sweating from all the running he had done, caused him to have a look of anxiety on his face.

“I’m late, I’m late.”

Xuan Yuan Po ran to Chen Chang Sheng’s side, looking very concerned; he was afraid he had delayed things; he reached out, preparing to grab onto Chen Chang Sheng’s hand.

Minister Xin had visited Orthodox Academy to leak the exam topic, this was proof that he, or perhaps His Eminence, The Archbishop, believed crossing the river was the most difficult task for Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng hadn’t said anything in regards to this, but Xuan Yuan Po and Tang Thirty-Six had privately agreed to some preparations, preparations that involved some sacrifice.

Xuan Yuan Po was preparing to grab onto Chen Chang Sheng’s hand, then throwing him across to the opposite shore.

Undetected, Tang Thirty-Six had lightly stepped behind Chen Chang Sheng, he and Xuan Yuan Po knew very clearly that Chen Chang Sheng would never agree to this method and that he would definitely start struggling. His task therefore, was to restrain Chen Chang Sheng when this happened.

Chen Cheng Sheng finally reacted, guessing what they had in mind, he said: “Don’t do anything reckless.”

At this moment, Tang Thirty-Six’s hand was only about a foot (1/3 metre) away from his back; he could have restrained him at a moment’s notice.

Xuan Yuan Po looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said: “We don’t know the reason, but we do know that you have a reason where you must place first upon the First Banner, I don’t have the need, I can wait for the next Grand Examination.”

While saying those words, the yao youth continued to have the honest expression he usually had, though, it was more serious than usual.

Chen Chang Sheng felt moved, but he wouldn’t accept this heavy act of friendship, he said: “I have my own method.”

He didn’t manage to finish his words, as Tang Thirty-Six’s hand was already upon his shoulder, Xuan Yuan Po’s hand flashed forwards – these two fellow students of Chen Chang Sheng knew him too well, they decided not to give him any chance to persuade

them, yet, in the next moment, they found that their plans had come to naught, as Xuan Yuan Po's hand hadn't managed to grasp onto Chen Chang Sheng's.

A small pair of hands came in from the side, grasping onto Xuan Yuan Po's hand.

The hands belonged to Luo Luo.

Chapter 137 – A Shallow River

In this year's Grand Examination, the martial phase was used to decrease the amount of examinees; the Dallying Forest and River Qu were an insurmountable obstacle for a lot of people.

The Education Board had secretly leaked information on this phase to Orthodox Academy. Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po made preparations for this in advance, in order to ensure Chen Chang Sheng will enter the final duelling phase, though they knew that his chances of placing first upon the First Banner were near non-existent, they were still willing to do this, to offer their support. But they, like everyone else, at the time of planning this, had assumed that Luo Luo would not be participating in the Grand Examination.

Therefore, they never anticipated that Luo Luo would shove in her hand, gripping onto Xuan Yuan Po's.

“Did the two of you not think about why I decided to participate in the Grand Examination? I am also a student of Orthodox Academy, for you not to think that I can do something makes me feel rather disappointed.”

Luo Luo looked at Xuan Yuan Po and Tang Thirty-Six while she spoke, as she said she was disappointed, her eyes were bright like stars, with traces of disappointment evident upon her face.

Upon finishing her words, her sleeve lightly shook, the small hands that were gripping onto Xuan Yuan Po suddenly exerted force.

With a sudden whooshing sound, Xuan Yuan Po disappeared from the ground and became a streaking shadow across the air.

Due to how sudden this was, he hadn't managed to mentally prepare himself for it, he screamed as he streaked through the air, attracting the attention of examinees from both sides of the river.

The River Qu was at its widest within the Garden of Dawn, the distance between the sea of trees and the meadow opposite was separated by at least a hundred metres.

Under the gaze of countless eyes, Xuan Yuan Po pierced through the air, his arms and legs flailing as he sailed across, marking out a singular line across the air, plummeting towards the Southern shore's grasslands.

Silence blanketed both sides of the river and all that could be heard were his wild cries; faintly, it seemed as if it could be heard that he was crying for his mother.

A loud crash resonated.

The grasslands of the Southern shore shuddered for an instant, dust scattering everywhere and brown grass roiled out; dark soil, akin to some blossoming growth in water, billowed out in all directions.

Xuan Yuan Po dropped down heavily like a boulder.

After a while, the dust slowly settled and Xuan Yuan Po got up onto his feet, he patted himself free of dirt and grass, vacantly looking around himself; though he seemed to be dazed from the experience, it hadn't caused any injury.

Seeing this scene, the clergy of Li Palace and the examinees that were situated on both sides of the river were dumbfounded and speechless, they wondered what this yao youth's body was made of, how could it be so tough?

Gou Han Shi, Zhuang Huan Yu and the others had already switched their gaze towards the opposite shore, towards the forest edge; looking at the petite figure there, their faces showed complicated expressions.

She lived up to the position of being second on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, Luo Luo's casual throw and the amount of strength it displayed was simply bewildering.

At the Northern shore, Luo Luo turned her gaze towards Tang Thirty-Six; her small brow twitched, an indication of her intent.

Tang Thirty-Six quickly distanced himself from Chen Chang Sheng, hastily saying: "I don't need any assistance."

He didn't want to be thrown across the river like Xuan Yuan Po; the problem created from landing aside, the most important issue was how unsightly it would look.

“I’m going ahead,” he said to Chen Chang Sheng. He had only just gathered his wits; in his preparations with Xuan Yuan Po, he had overlooked Luo Luo, but since she had intervened, there was no longer any need for him to worry, the only fear he had was that Luo Luo might have gotten addicted to throwing people and would ignore his protests to forcibly help him anyway. He hurriedly dashed towards the river, as if he was escaping from something.

Though he looked a little pathetic in his escape and his figure a little comical, upon his stepping onto the river, he once again resumed his refined look.

Night Clouds End.

The Sword of Wen Shui remained in its scabbard upon his waist; he used the Three Forms of Wen Shui unarmed.

A fiery aura immediately enveloped the Northern shore, though it was still early in the day, it seemed as if the dim glow of sunset had suddenly descended.

His figure was within this sunset, it transformed into a strip of golden light on the river’s surface, bounding across its entire expanse, taking but a moment to reach the Southern shore.

Today, apart from the four disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect, he was the only examinee to use his blade’s momentum to traverse the river.

Seeing this scene, Zhuang Huan Yu's expression became rather grave; Guan Fei Bai and Liang Ban Hu were also rather surprised.

Since the last night of the Ivy League gathering, only a short amount of time had passed; Tang Thirty-Six's ability had risen once again, beyond the expectations of many.

Thinking back upon the update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and the evaluation of this youth from Wen Shui by the Council of Divine Ordinance, the examinees who were standing upon the Southern shore had complicated feelings, they silently thought to themselves: did this mean he really would be able to enter the top 10 if he was to apply himself more diligently in training?

“Sir, please forgive my impropriety,” said Luo Luo, as she walked up to Chen Chang Sheng's side and did a formal gesture.

She wasn't clear on how tough Chen Chang Sheng's body was after his Purification, but believed it would be far weaker than Xuan Yuan Po.

At this moment however, apart from throwing him across, she couldn't think of any other method; Tang Thirty-Six had already crossed over, so he should be able to think of some way to receive him, the only problem was, her status was that of a student, for a student to hurl their tutor across like a child, she couldn't stop herself worrying over if he would be displeased.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't have a chance to reply; an examiner had quickly made their way over, stopping Luo Luo's actions.

The examiner nervously said to Luo Luo: “Your Highness, your

actions are in violation of the rules for the Grand Examination...”

Luo Luo noticed that the scholars from Scholartree Manor who were currently on the Southern shore, had begun conversing with the invigilator, this gave her an inkling of what was happening and her brow lightly twitched.

She said, in a rather unhappy tone: “From the rules I had previously heard for the Martial Trial, there wasn’t anything regarding this, not to mention I’ve already thrown one person across, don’t tell me it won’t be approved?”

During the planning stages of the Grand Examination, they didn’t think of the method used by Orthodox Academy, the examiners didn’t dare offend Luo Luo, but they felt that this was a clear violation of the long-held rule forbidding students from the same academy or sect from helping each other. Not to mention, like the scholars from Scholartree Manor, a lot of examinees were raising complaints, putting the examiners in a difficult position.

It didn’t take for long for a final verdict to come from the Hall of Zhao Wen: as Xuan Yuan Po had already been thrown across the river and the examiners had been lacking in making the rules clear, the result will be accepted, but for subsequent cases, they strictly prohibit any examinees from helping each other; an examinee can only rely upon their own ability in crossing the river; they also reiterated that the usage of any tools was strictly prohibited.

It was evident that those in the Hall of Zhao Wen, such as Mo Yu and the principal of Li Palace College had considered the fact that Luo Luo usually carried countless items on her. If she was to give

Chen Chang Sheng another Thousand Mile Button, then, not just crossing the River Qu, even appearing at River Wang instantly wouldn't be a problem.

Luo Luo was fuming, she said: "I'll like to see who would dare to stop me."

Finishing those words, she moved to take hold of Chen Chang Sheng's hand.

When Tang Thirty-Six had used Night Clouds End to gallantly cross the river, the sound of a bell resonated from the direction of the forest, this indicated that time was up and that those remaining within the sea of trees were now disqualified. Following this, examinees that were still on the Northern shore made their last efforts to cross; all fell prey to the murky green waters of the river.

Currently, the riverside only had Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo remaining.

Apart from them, there were dozens of clergy from Li Palace, these clergy members didn't dare to forcibly stop her and could only try earnestly persuading her from the side.

Chen Chang Sheng tried to persuade her: "I have a method for crossing the river, you don't have to worry."

No one noticed that while he was saying these words, he had

discreetly tucked away a Thousand Mile Button into his sleeve. However, he hadn't lied, Minister Xin had leaked the exam topic to them, how could he have made no preparations? With his current level of ability, he had at least three different methods for crossing the river, but he had to keep certain things hidden for use in the duelling phase.

Luo Luo gave him a wide-eyed stare and asked him earnestly: "Sir, you really have confidence in this?"

Chen Chang Sheng extended his hand and rubbed her head, saying: "Don't you usually have absolute confidence in me? If I wasn't able to even cross this river, then how am I supposed to place first upon the First Banner?"

The clergy of Li Palace, upon seeing how close he was with Luo Luo, felt extremely astonished, they were equally speechless upon hearing his words; but seeing that Her Highness appeared to accept his words, they finally settled down and left the riverside, returning to their respective positions, waiting for the end of the Martial Trial.

Luo Luo was usually obedient to Chen Chang Sheng's instructions, since he had already made a decision, she wasn't going to say anything else; she got onto a large rock by the riverside, bent her knees and then jumped.

All that could be heard was a thunderous cracking sound, the large rock that was half covered in moss had split into two from its centre.

A piercing sound from something splitting the air resounded above.

Upon the Southern shore, it seemed like as if an invisible bell had been struck, a loud ringing sound could be heard.

This was the sound of space being crushed.

A skirt gently fluttered, then landed.

Luo Luo appeared upon the meadow; two clouds of dust encircled her skirt, akin to blossoming flowers.

The clergy of Li Palace and examinees who saw this scene, had their mouths slightly agape, stunned to the point of being speechless; this was far too strong.

Luo Luo ignored the shocked stares that fell upon her, the first thing she did was to turn around and look towards the other shore, her eyes full of worry.

She had always been confident in Chen Chang Sheng's ability, possibly to the point of worship. She felt that her tutor had many things hidden, yet, she was still worried, for she couldn't think of the method her tutor would use to cross over.

Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po went to her side, they then

turned their gazes towards the opposite shore.

Gou Han Shi, Tian Hai Sheng Xue, Zhuan Huan Yu, Qi Jian... all the examinees that had completed the Martial Trial appeared by the riverside, turning their gazes towards the Northern shore.

Chen Chang Sheng stood by himself, solitarily, on that shore.

For even Luo Luo to feel this worried, what could the others be thinking?

No one could imagine what method Chen Chang Sheng could use to cross the river.

Even if he had completed his Purification, even if his divine sense was strong, if he didn't have sufficient levels of True Essence, he wouldn't be able to break through the natural restrictions placed by Heaven and Earth.

Some of the examinees revealed gloating expressions.

The four scholars from Scholartree Manor had expressions of indifference, but their eyes revealed endless contempt and ridicule.

The young junior from Holy Maiden Peak was smiling elatedly.

The entire continent knew that Chen Chang Sheng needed to place first upon the First Banner, if he couldn't even pass this

obstacle, it really would become a joke.

Guan Fei Bai suddenly said: “I hope he manages to cross.”

Qi Jian and Liang Ban Hu nodded their heads in agreement.

Gou Han Shi replied: “I’ve never doubted that he will make it across.”

The three of them turned around to look at their senior, not quite understanding.

Gou Han Shi continued: “Those who truly have high ambitions will not overlook small details, he wishes to place first upon the First Banner; how could he possibly be unable to cross such a shallow river?”

At this moment, Chen Chang Sheng finally made a move.

Under the observation of countless gazes, he didn’t make a move towards the River Qu, but instead, raised his head to look towards the deep blue sky.

Within the pale clouds of this early Spring, he seemed to be searching for something.

At that moment, the cry of a crane could be heard from far away.

Chapter 138 – Riding A Crane To The Southern Shore

An emerald river separated the two shores; all the examinees were currently on the Southern shore, with only Chen Chang Sheng remaining opposite, looking solitary, lonely.

This scene and the mood it evoked, in comparison to the declaration that had spread across the entire continent, made it all the more poignant, or perhaps, more pitiful. The stares, be they empathetic, contemptuous or cold, they all waited for the end to his time in the Grand Examination; no one could have guessed, therefore, that the first thing to come from their waiting would have been the cry of a crane.

The Capital's Spring skies were filled with wandering clouds; suddenly, from the lower strata of clouds, a line appeared; at the fore of this line was a White Crane.

Countless gazes followed the path of this White Crane, watching as it flew across the sky before arriving at the Garden of Dawn and alighting by the riverside where Chen Chang Sheng was; these gazes all changed.

“It can't be...” Gou Han Shi thought to himself, feeling rather stunned.

Guan Fei Bei involuntarily took a few steps towards the edge of the river, gawking at the White Crane, he said in an astonished voice: “It can't be...”

Qi Jian's mouth was slightly agape; he managed to stop himself from uttering those three words himself with much difficulty.

At the riverside, a lot of the examinees looking upon this scene, endured what seemed to be an excruciatingly slow flight, yet, it didn't take long to land upon the meadow.

Chen Chang Sheng dismounted from the White Crane, looking very much the picture of some Elder; he gave a formal gesture of thanks.

Luo Luo rushed up in greeting, delighted; gazing upon the White Crane with much curiosity.

Her Royal Father had once said that White Cranes have an immortal leaning, furthermore, due to both being 'surnamed' White; White Emperor City did not use White Cranes for carrying people.

She had seen a lot of different yao beasts since young, but had rarely come into contact with White Cranes, at the last Ivy League gathering, since seeing the crane, she had wanted to get closer; she looked at Chen Chang Sheng, enquiring through her gaze whether if she could stroke the crane.

She knew that the White Crane did not belong to her tutor, but she felt that the crane would eventually belong to him and that as a student, her request wasn't discourteous.

As the Princess of the yao race, the White Crane wasn't accustomed to the presence exuded by Luo Luo, or perhaps it could

be said that it was wary; without waiting for Chen Chang Sheng to make a response, it let out a clear cry, spread its wings and flew up, high into the air.

Chen Chang Sheng waved farewell to the crane.

Luo Luo felt remorseful, but also thankful towards the White Crane for helping her tutor cross the river today; she earnestly waved to express her gratitude.

The cries of the crane gradually faded into the distance.

Silence enveloped the meadow.

What was this?

Was this the Grand Examination or was it some kind of joke? In order to cross this river that was over 100 metres wide, the examinees that had come from various sects and academies all resorted to numerous means, using all they could muster, yet, this Chen Chang Sheng... he had actually ridden a crane across.

More importantly, he had actually ridden that White Crane across.

That's correct, that White Crane was famous, recognised by many, especially for the youths that had come from the Southern Domain.

It was Xu You Rong's White Crane.

A lot people took notice that when the White Crane left, it had flown towards the South.

Holy Maiden Peak was located in the South.

Everyone turned to stare at Chen Chang Sheng, they had complicated expressions on their faces.

More so for the disciples of Holy Maiden Peak and the Longevity Sect, their expressions were especially extreme.

None of them knew that the White Crane had arrived at the Capital days ago and that Chen Chang Sheng had requested it to stay.

Therefore, they couldn't help but guess; was it Xu You Rong herself that requested the White Crane travel thousands of miles, from the South to the Capital, in order to especially provide assistance to her fiancé in the Grand Examination?

Luo Luo held onto Chen Chang Sheng's sleeve, her little face beaming in joy, constantly praising his intellect.

Her praise was exceedingly genuine, to the point where it started to make Chen Chang Sheng feel rather embarrassed.

Tang Thirty-Six patted him on the shoulder, not saying anything else.

Xuan Yuan Po looked at him while shaking his head, he wanted to say this wasn't good, but upon thinking that he was technically his Grand Master, all he could do was to drearily remain quiet.

Su Mo Yu approached, stared at him and asked: "Is this allowed?"

It was an honest question, without any ridicule or contempt, he was genuinely asking Chen Chang Sheng as to if any rules were being broken.

This question was one that many examinees present were also asking.

One of the scholars from Scholartree Manor had found an invigilator and was talking to them with a stern expression on their face.

The examinees turned their gazes towards that direction, waiting for a final verdict.

After a time, the invigilator walked up the students of Orthodox Academy, looked at Chen Chang Sheng and mournfully said: "This is not allowed."

For the invigilators and other related personnel that were here today, at least half of them were from the Education Board and thus, leaned towards Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng, but this leaning only extended to the finer minutiae of the exam, such as the provisions of tea and stationary supplies, or the position of seating and such; with so many eyes bearing witness to Chen Chang Sheng crossing the river on a crane, they couldn't favour him even if they wanted to.

Chen Chang Sheng was obviously confident of success before making his move.

“The rules do not forbid crossing the river with this method.”

He singled out one of the examinees and pointed at them: “Previously, while on the other shore, he asked the examiner: if he was to bring the personal steed of his sect's Elder and fly across while mounted upon it, would this also count as passing, the examiner did not disprove of this.”

The disciple from the Longevity Sect's Precipice of Violet Qi was stunned, thinking to himself, “don't tell me my question will turn out to be something that will help you?” yet, under the stares of everyone present, he couldn't deny having asked that question.

The invigilator was stunned by what they heard; they then smiled while shaking their head, but didn't say anything else.

Seeing what was happening, a lot of the examinees vehemently protested; Gou Han Shi, Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Zhuang Huan Yu

remained silent.

Su Mo Yu spoke: “This... is a rather disingenuous interpretation of the rules, but as long as it doesn’t break any of them, I don’t have anything to say on the matter.”

As the representative student for Li Palace College, his words had a degree of authority amongst the students of the Capital, coupled with the silence from Zhuang Huan Yu and the two students of Star Seizer Academy, sounds of protest dimmed. Only a number of youths from the South were persistent in their appeals to the invigilator to disqualify Chen Chang Sheng.

“Wait? Where did they go?”

Someone suddenly interjected; Chen Chang Sheng’s group had disappeared from the riverside.

Everyone turned around to look; unknown when, the Orthodox Academy group had left the meadow and were about to enter the woodlands ahead.

One of the scholars from Scholartree Manor looked upon their fading figures and said in a cold voice: “Shameless to the extreme.”

Chen Chang Sheng did not feel that crossing the river on a crane was shameless, though, he also didn’t think of it as something to be proud of. Just as the colloquial usage of “smart”, it was hard to objectively judge; the Grand Examination was too important for

him, and his opponents were far too strong, thus, he had to make use of all the advantages available to him.

As long as he could achieve his aims without bringing harm upon anyone, the views others had of him were not important. In order to place first on the First Banner, his biggest advantage was that no one knew of his current ability and strength, this even included Luo Luo; conversely, with aid from the Education Board, he had information on all the other examinees.

This was the reason why he felt a sense of unease as he saw that youth at the pavilion.

That youth was too secretive, to the point of being a little unfathomable.

Within the cool Spring breeze, that youth wore but a single piece of clothing, his sleeves rolled up to reveal his arms, as if he had no fear of the cold at all.

In the information provided by the Education Board, that youth was registered as a student of Star Seizer Academy, named Zhang Ting Tao.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't believe it to be his real name.

That youth did not participate in the Academic Exam and was the fastest to cross the sea of trees, the earliest to cross the River Qu, to enter these woodlands, to enter this pavilion, yet, he hadn't done

anything else since.

Be it when Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue crossed the river, or when Luo Luo had leapt across, or even when he had ridden the crane across, no matter how crowded the riverside had gotten, he still remained within the pavilion.

That youth hadn't even directed a single glance towards the river.

He stood within the pavilion solitarily, causing the pavilion and the mountain to also become solitary.

This lonely person couldn't have possibly been named Ting Tao (listening to waves).

Listening to waves upon the shore; though it looked solitary and refined, it was a yearning for its clamour.

“If I'm not mistaken, that person's real name should be Zhe Xiu.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked towards the pavilion and that youth, a serious expression upon his face: “That, is a wolf from the North.”

Chapter 139 – The Wolf Tribe Youth

Hearing those words, Chen Chang Sheng finally came to know of that youth's name. Since knowing Tang Thirty-Six, and subsequently, the days following, where they became fellow students of Orthodox Academy, he had heard Tang Thirty-Six mention the words "wolf-child" many times, now, he knew that this wolf-child had been in the North.

A wolf was not a dog, therefore a wolf pup did not carry the same connotations as a dog pup; Tang Thirty-Six and many of the young geniuses on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, were used to using "wolf-child" to describe that fearsome youth of the North. In truth, this was in order to maintain a balance to their sights; to shorten the distance between them, yet, its real insinuation was... fear and respect.

The first time Chen Chang Sheng had heard Tang Thirty-Six mention the wolf-child was at the inn before the Mausoleum of Books.

At that time, he felt that his attitude when uttering those two words were a little complicated, carrying some sense of wariness or perhaps even respect, it had to be known that for a youth as proud as Tang Thirty-Six, even figures such as Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi wouldn't be able to evoke genuine feelings of respect from him.

He hadn't asked as to who that wolf-child was, nor had he queried as to that wolf-child's origins or school. This was because he had concentrated all his time and effort on cultivation and training, not to mention, according to the tone of Tang Thirty-Six's voice, that wolf-child seemed to be distant to the point of

being on the edge of heaven, therefore, he was naturally not inclined to care.

It wasn't until today, at Li Palace, before that dawn; his gaze fell upon that youth, making it hard to ignore. He finally came to know, that youth had a name that was unlike others – Zhe Xiu, even if he was to try and forget this name, it would be difficult.

“The wrathful Zhe Xiu...” Luo Luo stood beside him, peering at that youth and said in quiet voice: “This is also my first time seeing him.”

Chen Chang Sheng slightly trembled as he heard her words, he lightly lowered his head and looked, only seeing that she was looking at that youth with eyes full of sympathy, unknown why, he suddenly felt a little uncomfortable.

“This is probably the first time anyone here has seen him.”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at that youth, his expression a little complex: “From birth to cultivation, to the start of hunting; he had always lived in the cold Northern snow plains; he's never left; even those living at Yung Xue Pass would rarely see him, let alone those of us who are living in a so called great and peaceful era.”

Hearing those melancholic words, Chen Chang Sheng remained quiet for a time, before asking: “Just what type of person is he?”

“He is a yao person”

Tang Thirty-Six gave Luo Luo a glance and said: “A yao human.”

The yao and human races had a close alliance relationship, but rarely intermarried and did not have any well-known, bitter-sweet love stories.

That’s because intermarriage between the two races tended to bring about some unhappy consequences.

A yao human, a descendent of a yao and a human; a person that possesses the mixed bloodline from two races, they were of a high intellect, but faced challenges in cultivation that were difficult to overcome.

Luo Luo’s father is the White Emperor, her mother is a human princess from the Great Western Continent, strictly speaking, she was also a yao human.

Nominally, due to being female, she couldn’t practise the fierce cultivation arts of the White Emperor, but in reality – known to only a few of those who were closest to the Royal family, the real reason was because of her yao human bloodline, which stopped her from being able practise the White Emperor cultivation art to a high level.

The White Emperor couple had a very good relationship and the White Emperor himself had no intention of taking a concubine. The couple were very devoted towards their only daughter and were reluctant to have another child.

Luo Luo being unable to practise the White Emperor clan’s

cultivation art to its zenith would also mean being unable to succeed her Royal Father's throne.

This was currently the biggest problem facing the Ten Thousand Mile Yao Domain and the reason why important personages such as Jin Yu Lu and Lady Official Li treated Chen Chang Sheng like a member of the same race; it wasn't only because Luo Luo had taken him as her teacher, but also because they could see the possibility of Her Highness being able to solve her problem under the guidance of Chen Chang Sheng.

That youth named Zhe Xiu was under similar circumstances to Luo Luo, his father is a member of the wolf tribe and his mother is a human, however, his parents do not have as powerful or noble a bloodline as Luo Luo's parents.

His father's bloodline was dominant, therefore, his cultivation talent remained largely intact; it was a shame then, that the problem he faced was far more severe than Luo Luo's.

Two years ago, when the Zhou Dynasty discussed military achievements, the Divine Empress and Pope had a conversation; this conversation was subsequently leaked out to the public, leading to the entire continent to learn of the wolf tribe youth's problem. It was an intractable problem, one that even the Divine Empress and Pope couldn't provide any assistance on, yet, no one knew what this problem was.

Finally, some private information had actually come in from Old Snow City instead, spreading to the central plains. From the word of several demon race members who had fortuitously escaped from that wolf tribe youth, it could be ascertained that the problem faced by that wolf tribe youth was psychological in nature.

This was probably the reason why, in that harsh and unforgiving

snow plain, he had been referred to by both, demons and the human military alike, the wrathful Zhe Xiu.

After hearing this, Chen Chang Sheng once again turned his gaze towards that youth, he suddenly felt that the youth was even more lonely.

Xuan Yuan Po said: “He is also famous amongst my tribe.”

Within the Ten Thousand Mile Yao Domain, most of the tribes continued to rely upon hunting for a living; they had the utmost respect for great hunters.

The wrathful Zhe Xiu, was a most successful hunter.

He didn't associate with the human world, nor did he associate with the yao world, he travelled across the snow plains, relying upon hunting the demon race for a living.

In these last few years, countless members of the demon race had died to his hands.

Be it intentional or not, he had solved a lot of troubles for the Zhou Dynasty's Northern Front, therefore, whenever the Zhou Dynasty had discussions on military achievements, his name would never be forgotten; when he wanted to use Star Seizer Academy's name to enter the Grand Examination, the Zhou army had unreservedly welcomed him.

At this moment, Su Mo Yu approached, looking towards the pavilion he said to the group: “You have also recognised who he is?”

Chen Chang Sheng nodded in reply.

“Previously, in the Academic Exam, when Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue had strange looks when they saw him, I had already questioned the possibility of it being him.”

Su Mo Yu gave a formal greeting to Luo Luo, before continuing: “I’ve heard that His Royal Majesty, The White Emperor and Her Divine Majesty, The Divine Empress, both wish to employ him, the only trouble is, no one had been able to find him; who would have thought that he would come to the Grand Examination.”

A wolf travelling a thousand miles for meat.

The wolf tribe youth that had always lived apart from the pack, why did he leave the snow plains and come to the flourishing Capital to participate in the Grand Examination?

“He’s interested in the Heavenly Tomes?” Chen Chang Sheng looked towards the direction of the Mausoleum of Books.

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “Everyone’s interested in the Heavenly Tomes, but if we were to convert the members of the demon race he has killed into military accolades, they would be more than enough for him to enter the mausoleum many times.”

No one knew of that wolf tribe youth's reason for entering the Grand Examination.

At this time, all the examinees were already aware of who he was, but no one came near the pavilion and further still, no one tried to converse with that youth.

This included even the examiners; everyone's stares were full of fear and respect, no one wanted to get close.

Even those who had already completed their Ethereal Opening, the strongest here; Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue, they did not get close.

That youth stood there, remaining solitary and the pavilion and mountain became solitary alongside him.

"He's very strong." Luo Luo suddenly said.

The wolf tribe youth was obviously strong, he had been placed second upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, until the sudden update to the proclamation that resulted in Luo Luo placing ahead of him. For the past two years, he had only been under Xu You Rong; many even believed that this was due to him rarely making an appearance, if they were to have a match with their lives on the line, Xu You Rong wouldn't necessarily be a match for him.

That's because this youth was specialised in death battles.

Totalling everyone that was currently on the South shore, examiners and examinees alike; the number of lives they had taken were definitely less than his total.

Bell chimes came rolling in from the faraway Hall of Zhao Wen, this indicated that the academic and martial phases of the examination had come to a complete end.

After counting, the remaining examinees after disqualification numbered 113 people.

The Grand Examination only took Three Grades: The First Grade took 3 people; the Second Grade, 10; the Third Grade, 30; for a total of 43 people.

This was the same every year.

This was because for entering the Mausoleum of Books, there were only 43 paths.

Entering the Three Grades granted the privilege of entering the Mausoleum, this was the aim of most of the examinees for participating in the Grand Examination.

Observing the Heavenly Tomes, gaining insight on The Way, this was something all cultivators dreamt of, this was also a path proven through countless years as to being the route towards becoming a true expert.

According to the times taken to cross the River Qu, the examinees were reordered.

That wolf tribe youth was placed first.

The gazes everyone gave him were complicated, they naturally knew that Zhang Ting Tao was a fake name.

Under the leading of the Li Palace clergy, a hundred odd examinees left the Southern shore's woodlands and headed towards a deeper part of the Garden of Dawn.

It didn't take long for them to reach a large evergreen tree.

Early Spring season, upon the trees within the Capital's streets and alleys, only small green shoots had begun to appear, yet, this evergreen tree was covered in countless green leaves that swayed in the cold breeze; akin to someone gloating.

This evergreen tree had a lot to be proud of; apart from being swathed in green, it was also immense in size.

Lightly enveloped by clouds, its highest reaches were partially covered; its top was actually out of sight.

Its trunk was incredibly thick, needing at least ten people to fully encircle.

The lower part of this tree had a hollow opening; the dark cavity gave off a slightly sinister feeling.

The clergy of Li Palace led examinees into this hollow opening.

Beyond the hollow, was another world.

This was a porcelain blue sky, more perfect than the sky outside of the tree.

The blue sky had faint clouds drifting by.

Far away, you could make out the images of multiple palaces.

Chen Chang Sheng felt that this place looked a little familiar.

Luo Luo said: “Sir, you’ve been here before.”

Chen Chang Sheng finally understood, the site for the duelling phase was located within Little Li Palace, the Education Palace.

Within the cultivation realm, this place had a more famous name.

The Pope’s Green Leaf World.

Those examinees who were experiencing this miniature world

for the first time had their jaws lightly hanging, their faces full of awe.

Just like how Chen Chang Sheng and Xuan Yuan Po had reacted when they first visited.

Chen Chang Sheng no longer revealed the uncultured expression he had before, the one that was ridiculed by Tang Thirty-Six.

He was calm and therefore didn't miss some details.

Seeing the Pope's Green Leaf World, a lot of the examinees were exclaiming their wonder.

That wolf tribe youth did not observe this world, but instead, was looking at Luo Luo.

Chen Chang Sheng suddenly felt a strong sense of danger.

Chapter 140 – The Battle That Can't Be Seen

At the next moment, Chen Chang Sheng was unsure as to if he had been mistaken, that's because the wolf tribe youth hadn't turned his head and was solitarily walking ahead of the group; without turning around, how could he have looked at Luo Luo? No one noticed the change to his state, not even Tang Thirty-Six or Xuan Yuan Po, who were next to him; everyone's attention was focused upon this perfect world; only Luo Luo noticed that something was amiss and quietly asked a few words.

"I still find something strange about today; in the duelling to come, you need to be cautious," Chen Chang Sheng did not mention what he had just seen, nor did he hide his discomfort, saying: "If there's any danger, then leave immediately or listen to my instructions."

Luo Luo chose to enter the Grand Examination even without the need for results; Gou Han Shi and the others had already managed to gain an inkling on what her aim was; conversely, it was actually the involved party, Chen Chang Sheng, who hadn't thought of her aim. Listening to Chen Chang Sheng's warning, Luo Luo naturally didn't have any objections, replying: "I'll listen to my tutor's instructions."

The examinees followed the Li Palace clergyman forward, crossing a stretch of woods before coming to a round-shaped construction.

This construction covered an area of over a kilometre, and was around 30 odd metres in height, an extremely immense structure. Made of stone; atop of its stone steps, its door was tightly shut, stopping one from seeing inside, all that could be seen were the

black eaves overhead.

From the azure blue skies above, a lone cloud drifted close, that cloud reached the round-shaped construction and released a shower of rain; the rain pitter-pattered as it fell; it wasn't particularly heavy, but within a short time, it had cleared away the dirt and dust that had accumulated atop the eaves; the black eaves became ever more resplendent, dazzling in a brilliance akin to jade.

“The Tower of Purging Dust is the location for this year's Duelling Stage.”

The Li Palace clergyman turned around and addressed the examinees, before beginning to explain the rules for the duelling phase.

As with traversing the sea of trees and crossing the emerald river, in the last and most important phase of the Grand Examination, the rules were clear and simple; exceedingly easy to understand.

Examinees that had cleared the martial phase and gained the right to participate in the duelling phase totalled 113 people.

The first 15 people to cross the River Qu were automatically entered into the second round; the remaining 98 people were to fight in one-on-one matches, with the winners entering the second round to join the first 15.

One-on-one matches will continue each round until a final winner can be declared.

As for deciding the winner, this was even simpler: two examinees

conduct a duel, the last one standing will be declared the winner.

The loser will be eliminated, therefore, every round in this duelling phase was important, as there won't be any chances to make up for a loss.

The aim for most of the examinees was only to enter the Three Grades so that they may gain the privilege of entering the Mausoleum of Books, thus, the first round was the most important; as long as they could pass the first round, their chances of entering the Three Grades would be better than 50%.

As for the pairing of examinees for duels, this was also simple, to the point where it gave the impression that, as the coordinators of the Grand Examination, the Zhou Dynasty and Orthodoxy were being highly irresponsible; they had actually given the rights for choosing opponents to the examinees themselves.

Apart from the first 15, the next 49 examinees could freely choose their opponent from the last 49 remaining examinees. Those who are chosen cannot refuse, or they'll be considered to have given up on the examination and their opponent will automatically advance to the next round.

The examinees who had made it this far were not fools, upon hearing the rules, they fully understood its implications, the crowd became resonant with the sound of discussion.

Before any of the examinees could raise any complaints or perhaps doubts, the clear sound of a bell came in from the Tower of Purging Dust.

The Duelling Stage has officially started.

The bell chimes were a signal and everyone's gazes immediately fell upon the examinee that numbered 16th.

They were a student from Star Seizer Academy, with a large and stout body, a stern countenance and a manner that was restrained and unassuming, giving people the impression of someone that was low-key, yet not craven; very military-like.

If it were any other examinee, they would have perhaps found this situation difficult handle, or are least rather abrupt, but military personnel are focused upon following orders without fail, therefore, that youth didn't hesitate to leave the crowd, turning their gaze upon the remaining half of the examinees.

Their gaze slowly and calmly swept across the examinees.

Facing this gaze, the bottom-half examinees that were waiting to be chosen all had differing expressions, differing reactions: some were calm, akin to not noticing anything at all; some silently let out cold laughs as an intentional provocation; some lowered their heads and lightly shifted their bodies, hoping to avoid meeting their gaze; some forced themselves to put on a smile, a scene that would make the viewer feel sympathetic.

No one could have guessed that the student from Star Seizer Academy would have chosen the disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi as their opponent, the disciple that had previously questioned the examiner on the other shore of the River Qu.

The examinees couldn't control themselves and started conversing: it had to be known that the Precipice of Violet Qi was a branch of the Longevity Sect, that disciple couldn't have been the weakest amongst those present, to make such a choice, what was

the intention?

The disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi was momentarily shocked before coming to their senses and realising that they had been chosen. They calmly stepped out from the crowd, without feeling slighted from the choice – logically, the first to be chosen would be the weakest, but this disciple believed that the strength of divine sense and True Essence capacity were all just dead numbers, battles relied upon more factors; he had confidence in defeating his opponent.

The truth was also as such; currently, apart from the first 15 whose strength were slightly ahead of everyone else's by a degree, the remaining examinees were very close in strength; it cannot be said that those who were ranked in front would definitely win against those ranked behind.

With the first contestants decided, the clergyman didn't give them any time to prepare or adjust, taking the two examinees towards the Tower of Purging Dust.

All that could be seen was the door to that round-shaped construction slowly opening, beyond the door was pitch darkness, akin to some yawning abyss that could make a person shudder; the clergyman ushered them in before immediately closing the door behind them.

Looking at the tightly closed wooden doors, the examinees felt surprised; was this year's examination going to forbid spectating?

The Li Palace clergyman looked at everyone indifferently and said: "Due to special circumstances, this year's duelling will be

behind closed doors.”

Upon hearing these words, the examinees abounded in chatter, with some directly looking towards the direction of the Orthodox Academy group, particularly Chen Chang Sheng.

They were suspicious that the arrangements were due to him. If the duelling was to be behind closed doors, there wouldn't be any way of knowing details behind the battle, not mentioning the possibility of cheating, at the very least, were Chen Chang Sheng to lose, the Education Board would at least be able to preserve some of their dignity.

Chen Chang Sheng naturally knew that the arrangement had nothing to do with him; he looked towards the wolf tribe youth that was standing by himself solitarily, then quietly thought to himself that the closed-door duelling might have been requested by this person.

The Tower of Purging Dust had its wooden doors tightly shut, upon the black eaves above, scattered rain passed by its perimeter: pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

Being unable to see inside the tower, it was unknown as to how the first match was progressing; not even any sounds could be heard.

The atmosphere outside of the tower became somewhat tense, perhaps due to not being able to see or hear anything, leaving everything to the imagination, thus, the examinees became increasingly nervous with some choosing to cross their legs and sit upon the floor, closing their eyes and calming their minds, ignoring the situation.

Not long after, the doors to the Tower of Purging Dust opened.

The examinees all turned their gazes, even those who were sitting on the floor, like as if nothing could ever disturb them, had instantly opened their eyes.

The one who came out was the student from Star Seizer Academy, his face was pale and the collar to his uniform was ripped wide open with the faint stains of blood visible, yet his expression remained calm and relaxed.

An examiner from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green went to help treat his injuries, all that could be seen was a green light flashing out from stairs above; an aura that made everyone feel calm and comfortable shrouded the area.

Under normal circumstances, being able to see this female lecturer's Saintly Radiance of healing, would cause the examinees to give nonstop praise in admiration, but at this time, their concentration was solely focused upon the result of the duel.

The disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi did not come out.

Qi Jian went up to the Li Palace clergyman and asked: "Sir, our junior disciple is...?"

The bluffs of the Longevity Sect are of one voice, branches of the same sect.

Qi Jian is a disciple of Li Shan Sword Sect, enquiring about the status of a disciple from the Precipice of Violet Qi was something considered logical by many people. Only Chen Chang Sheng found this scene slightly puzzling, not understanding why it was the younger Qi Jian, who was evidently unused to handling these affairs, who had made the enquiry and not Gou Han Shi.

His seniors had yet to say anything, why had the junior brother been the first to voice his concern?

Chen Chang Sheng noticed that Gou Han Shi's expression was calm as usual, Guan Fei Bai and Liang Ban Hu did not have any sort of response, seemingly finding Qi Jian's action to be normal.

The Li Palace clergyman answered: "The loser cannot remain here, the person you are asking for has already been escorted out of the Education Palace, at this moment they should be at the Hall of Resplendent Bravery getting their injuries treated, there's no need to worry."

Qi Jian turned his head to glance at Gou Han Shi, seeing that his senior didn't have any response, he returned.

The Li Palace clergyman glanced at the list in his hand, then turned his gaze towards the examinees and said: "Where is examinee number 17, Huo Guang?"

The moment he finished, a young scholar slowly walked out from the crowd.

That scholar wore an ochre coloured cheongsam, the stare between his eyes seemed to convey a cover of frost, his expression aloof and proud to the extreme.

He had the qualifications to back that pride.

Upon seeing him walk out, the bottom-half examinees had a turn in expression; the tension was higher than when the student from Star Seizer Academy was choosing their opponent.

That was because this scholar came from Scholartree Manor.

That scholar was the one who had previously gotten into a quarrel with Tang Thirty-Six in the Dallying Forest.

The atmosphere at the match grounds grew ever more tense, very few examinees dared to meet his gaze, many secretly prayed that he wouldn't choose them.

The clergy had arranged for the bottom-half examinees to stand in the Western section before the Tower of Purging Dust.

That scholar's gaze swept across the match grounds, turning towards a certain direction.

It turned towards the woodlands; covered densely in evergreen trees that could blot out the sun, it was a fair distance from the Tower of Purging Dust and thus, none of the examinees were standing there.

Luo Luo didn't like basking in the sun, even if it was an artificial one inside the Pope's Green Leaf World.

Therefore, Chen Chang Sheng had taken everyone to stand in that location.

The group from Orthodox Academy, were standing by the woodlands.

That scholar from Scholartree Manor's gaze had fallen upon the woodlands, upon the group from Orthodox Academy.

Chen Chang Sheng's expression was calm.

Xuan Yuan Po did not have any reaction; he was staring at an ant near his feet vacuously.

Luo Luo held a silk handkerchief and was using it to fan Chen Chang Sheng.

Only Tang Thirty-Six had some sort of reaction.

His brow twitching, head raised, staring at the scholar from Scholartree Manor.

His expression, indescribably proud, akin to saying: choose me, come choose me.

Chapter 141 – The Group By The Woodlands Undisturbed

Staring at that young scholar from Scholartree Manor, Tang Thirty-Six's brow was arched and his chin was raised high. There wasn't much difference between the expression for "come choose me" and "come fight me", in the end, it just gave the feeling of extreme arrogance and evoked the desire to pulverise the one making that face, even if the person making that face was good looking; in all honesty, it only made the viewer feel an even greater urge to hurt them, especially for those of the same gender.

The examinees all followed the scholar's gaze, understanding the hidden message behind Tang Thirty-Six's expression: "if you don't choose me, you're my grandchild."

That scholar had never thought of choosing Tang Thirty-Six as his opponent, no matter what was said, Tang Thirty-Six was still ranked 32nd on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; to choose him due to a personal dispute? Even if he was to win after much difficulty, it would definitely affect the subsequent matches and his overall result in the examination. Such an action wasn't one taken by the wise.

Scholartree Manor's cultivation was focused upon wisdom, so he obviously wasn't going to do this; resting his gaze upon the group from Orthodox Academy was only intended to make them feel anxious, who could have known that Tang Thirty-Six would be so arrogant and confrontational.

The scholar's face darkened, thinking back to the incident in the forest and Tang Thirty-Six's callous words, the scholar suddenly felt a rush of blood to his head and could no longer control himself; he raised his right hand, preparing to point at Tang Thirty-Six.

It was at this moment that a hand came in from the side, forcing down the scholar's own. It was a fellow student that had stopped him; this fellow student had a young looking face; he seemed to be the youngest amongst the four that had come to participate in the Grand Examination, but his status was also the highest, previously, at the Northern shore, he was also the one that stopped his fellow student from seeking justice from Orthodox Academy.

The scholar named Huo Guang stared at Tang Thirty-Six and gave him a few sneers, then randomly chose someone from the bottom-half examinees and headed towards the Tower of Purging Dust.

Seeing this scene, Chen Chang Sheng felt rather surprised; the Southern Domain really was unique; for Li Shan Sword Sect and Scholartree Manor, it was actually the youngest disciples who had the most influence with their words.

The second match ended even faster than the first; not long after, as if that scholar named Huo Guang had only entered the Tower of Purging Dust for a brief glance, he had once again pushed open the doors; his opponent didn't come out, evidently having lost and was escorted out of the Education Palace.

Previously, when crossing the River Qu, the four scholars of Scholartree Manor had more or less the same times, after Huo Guang, it was naturally his other three fellow students that went next; without any mishaps, one match after the other were completed, with each being faster than the last; they all achieved victory in the first round, obtaining entry into the next.

“Scholartree Manor... they really are this strong.” Su Mo Yu said in a melancholic voice as he walked up to the woodlands.

Tang Thirty-Six stared at the four scholars from Scholartree Manor, his expression gradually becoming heavy. He disliked these scholars, in his eyes, they adhered too strictly to rules and overvalued knowledge, not to mention, they also enjoyed snitching and using petty schemes; though, he couldn't deny their ability.

“That young scholar is named Zhong Hui, ranked 9th upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.”

He knew that Su Mo Yu would know this, but that Chen Chang Sheng wouldn't necessarily have any impression of this, he said in a low voice: “The other two scholars from Scholartree Manor are also ranked upon the proclamation and are within the top 100. That Huo Guang isn't listed on the proclamation, but has a strength that surpasses the other two; he had probably been hiding away in Scholartree Manor, studying for these past few years, preparing to shock the world in this year's examination.”

Three people that are placed upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds and one secretive young expert, Scholartree Manor's capability really was as unfathomable as people imagined. At this moment, if we were to consider the academies and sects present, apart from Li Shan Sword Sect, who were high above everyone else, then Scholartree Manor, Heavenly Academy and Orthodox Academy were probably the three strongest.

However, what made it slightly interesting was that the four from Orthodox Academy were currently in the bottom-half and could only wait for someone to pick them.

The Academic Exam required thinking, writing; the Martial Trial required using divine sense for detecting, allowing for preparation; duelling only required selecting an opponent and then fighting, not to mention, for duelling, winning or losing would usually be decided within a few exchanges, even if both contestants were to be fairly equal in ability, it still wouldn't take too long for the winner to be decided.

The doors to the Tower of Purging Dust continuously opened and closed, the oil on the door's hinges seemed to diminish due to the constant closure, eventually letting out a creaking sound; under this sound, the first round's matches quickly progressed, not taking long for dozens of matches to finish; some matches resulted in the higher ranked examinee winning, but the lower ranked examinees also won many.

The upper-half examinees had the right to choose their opponent, they could pick the opponent they deemed to be the weakest, but these young cultivators had prepared for an entire year in order to enter the Grand Examination, therefore, their information, or impression, would have been long outdated, making it difficult to determine who was strong or weak, let alone who would win or lose.

The previous update to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds had become the best source of information on examinees, firstly, the proclamation had sufficient authority; the Council of Divine

Ordinance's evaluation had a high credibility; secondly, the update was only done recently, therefore, the ability of those upon the proclamation would not have undergone any drastic changes in such a short time-frame; cases such as Xu You Rong and Luo Luo were not a regular occurrence.

Therefore, no examinees chose Su Mo Yu as their opponent; 33rd on the proclamation, apart from the first 15 examinees or the group from Scholartree Manor, amongst the remaining people, his strength was well within the top 5. As for Orthodox Academy, no one bothered with; only those who are insane would choose Her Highness, as for Tang Thirty-Six... even the scholar from Scholartree Manor didn't choose him, who would be stupid enough to draw him into a match?

Even Xuan Yuan Po didn't have anyone daring enough to choose him, though he was last upon the proclamation, he was still ranked; not to mention, yao cultivation is evidently different from that of humans, making their talent hard to gauge. Some of the upper-half examinees chose to pick someone ranked higher upon the proclamation than risk choosing him.

Yet, interestingly, or perhaps strangely, even Chen Chang Sheng, who was not listed upon the proclamation, didn't get chosen by anyone.

All the examinees knew that Chen Chang Sheng had yet to complete his Purification at the time of the proclamation's update; even if he was to experience some sort of miracle and had luckily managed to complete his Purification, with such a short period of cultivation, it definitely would not have been enough for him to

make any dramatic advances; he should have been the weakest person present, yet... no one chose him.

The area outside of the tower was very crowded, the woodlands in comparison were quiet and lonesome.

Luo Luo was hugging Chen Chang Sheng's arm, at his side, on the verge of falling asleep.

Xuan Yuan Po yawned a few times, his mouth opened wide enough to fit in an entire haunch of venison.

Tang Thirty-Six was busy speaking to Su Mo Yu, unknown as to what, but Su Mo Yu's face was full of astonishment.

The youths from Orthodox Academy were bored beyond belief.

Luckily, according to the rules, this boredom had an eventual end.

The doors to the Tower of Purging Dust once again creaked open, the young girl from Ci Jian Temple came out, her small face filled with tears of joy over her victory.

She threw herself into the arms of her senior sister, hoping to be coddled a little, but found that the current atmosphere was a little strange, she wiped away her tears and looked towards the match grounds.

An examinee walked to the match grounds with heavy steps,

looked towards the Western side of the Tower of Purging Dust's paved area, towards the woodlands; their face turned a little pale.

There were only five people left; he currently had to choose an opponent from amongst these five.

Chapter 142 – The Advancing Fist

That examinee suddenly turned around, staring at the clergyman who was in charge of the duelling phase, he pointed towards the four examinees behind him and asked: “Can I choose my opponent from someone amongst them?”

Those four examinees were the last of the first 64 to cross the River Qu, upon hearing that this person wished to challenge them, not only did they not feel any anger, conversely, they revealed signs of joy, expressing their approval.

The Li Palace clergyman answered indifferently: “Do you all think that the Grand Examination is some kind of joke? My explanation was clear; the upper-half 49 examinees can choose anyone from the remaining 49 as their opponent; the winner advances to the next round. Don’t tell me none of you understood what I said?

Silence followed, that examinee remained silent for a long while before suddenly saying: “This isn’t fair!”

He looked at the bottom-half examinees that had managed to achieve victory, angrily and loudly saying: “I scored better than they did in the Martial Trial, crossing the river before them, on what basis should I be required to fight against a stronger opponent? The Grand Examination isn’t some sort of joke, but don’t you think this type of rule is unreasonable?”

The Li Palace clergyman continued to show indifference and

replied: “It can only be said that your luck is bad; who told you to place between 60th and 64th in crossing the river?”

Hearing this, the match grounds erupted in an uproar, everyone thought to themselves, was luck something that was within the purview of what the Grand Examination graded for as well? The clergyman’s words were completely unreasonable.

The clergyman knew what these young cultivators were thinking and looked at them with a slightly frosty expression, saying: “What in this world is absolutely fair? On the battlefield, if you are placed in charge of guarding the rear, needing to block the advance of the demon race’s top fighters, would you refuse to carry out your orders because you find it unfair? If you want to survive, then luck is always the most important factor.”

The examinees all remained silent, they still disapproved of this reasoning, but they didn’t know how to refute it.

That examinee couldn’t do anything apart from accepting their bitter reality, something to take a measure of comfort from was that, in comparison to the remaining four, he had a marginally larger selection.

He once again turned around and directed his gaze towards the woodlands, shifting it from one person after the other in Chen Chang Sheng’s group, unable to make a decision.

The area before the tower was silent, with the surrounding air seemingly becoming cold and frosty, tens of examinees waited

nervously for his final decision.

Conversely, the ones who should have been most nervous, the group by the woodlands who could only await being chosen, they displayed an extremely calm demeanour.

Unknown why, the Li Palace clergyman didn't urge him to be quicker, unlike how he had previously done so for the others, this might have been because he and the other examiners were also curious about this examinee's choice.

Finally, that examinee made his decision, pointing at Xuan Yuan Po, saying: "I choose you."

The silence was broken and the sound of dialogue rose up; for any other examinee, they would also be troubled with whom to choose as their opponent.

Xuan Yuan Po was startled for a moment before finally coming to his senses, he said to Luo Luo: "Master, I'm leaving."

Tang Thirty-Six was standing by the side, his brow twitching and said: "'leaving' doesn't sound very auspicious, change it."

Xuan Yuan Po ignored him, he did a formal gesture to Chen Chang Sheng and said: "I'm leaving."

Technically speaking, he should be calling Chen Chang Sheng his Grand Master; but, even though he currently admired, or maybe

even respected him, he still couldn't bring himself to call out this form of address.

The ignored Tang Thirty-Six didn't get angry, raising his hand high and patting the yao youth's broad shoulder, he quietly said: "You remember what was said last night?"

Xuan Yuan Po made a sound of acknowledgement, saying: "Don't give the opponent any chance to think, use the fastest speed possible to close in on them, then directly strike them down."

Finishing those words, he suddenly found that Tang Thirty-Six's expression was a little strange, likewise he found that Luo Luo and Chen Chang Sheng also had a change in their expressions, even Su Mo Yu had his jaw lightly hanging, evincing his surprise.

"What wrong?" he blankly rubbed the back of his head, asking: "Did I get it wrong?"

Tang Thirty-Six sighed as he once again patted him on the shoulder, saying: "You didn't say it wrong, you were just a little loud."

It was only then, that Xuan Yuan Po realised the area before the Tower of Purging Dust was quiet as can be; everyone was staring at him with spectacular expressions upon their faces.

His voice was loud and clear, he had answered Tang Thirty-Six very naturally, without thinking to tone down his volume.

Thus, he had informed everyone present of the tactic Orthodox Academy had prepared for him in advance, including his opponent.

Was this battle tactic still going to be effective?

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head and placed two crystals into Xuan Yuan Po's pocket, he also passed a water pouch to Yuan Po's mouth and had him drink some.

Tang Thirty-Six moved to Xuan Yuan Po's side and said something to him quietly.

The Li Palace clergyman looked at the Orthodox Academy group, wanting to laugh yet holding back, saying: "Be a little quicker."

After being urged to hurry, Xuan Yuan Po felt a little nervous, almost choking on the water; Chen Chang Sheng quickly smacked his back; Tang Thirty-Six hastened his words, reminding him to pay attention to battle events; the match grounds became a little chaotic, seeing this scene, Su Mo Yu couldn't control himself, he shook his head and said: "There was such a long period of time previously and yet all of you just spent it frivolously, isn't it rather late to be rushing now?"

"You don't understand, if we told him too early, we would have to worry about him forgetting. Not to mention, we didn't know who his opponent would be, how could we teach him anything?" replied Tang Thirty-Six, without even turning his head around.

Luo Luo walked up to Xuan Yuan Po and said: “Since you’re going to win anyway, what is there to be nervous about?”

Xuan Yuan Po stammered a little, replying: “It... it... can’t be... helped.”

Chen Chang Sheng stared into his eyes and said: “Just remember Tang Thirty-Six’s words, you will win for certain.”

Xuan Yuan Po vigorously nodded his head.

Tang Thirty finally finished his last minute battle advice; he pumped a fist onto Xuan Yuan Po’s chest and said: “Have a good opening match.”

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Xuan Yuan Po stood upon a ground covered with sand, he lifted his head to look at the black eaves that created a circle and the blue sky above that had been segmented out by this circle; he was suddenly reminded of the dish back at the Hundred Herb Garden.

A single creak could be heard from behind him and the doors to the Tower of Purging Dust once again closed shut.

He came to his senses, finding that his mind had just wandered,

this didn't cause him to fluster, but instead, he found that he could clearly remember what Tang Thirty-Six had told him over these past few nights; he thought to himself, this should count as to not being nervous?

He looked opposite, gestured his hands and did a formal greeting to his opponent.

At this moment, on the floor of the tower, stood only he and his opponent, no examiners were present and neither could any sounds from outside the tower be heard; it seems there was some sort of silencing array in action.

An emotionless voice came drifting in from above.

“If you are ready, then you can start.”

Xuan Yuan Po peered at the upper floor but didn't see anyone, nor did he see any sort of window, he couldn't help being curious about the location of the examiners, he suddenly remembered what Chen Chang Sheng had told him and rushed to ask: “What if... what if someone was to be beaten to death?”

The Tower of Purging Dust was blanketed in silence; the unseen examiner was quiet for a long time.

His opponent had an unsightly expression upon their face.

The examiner's voice once again resounded: “It won't be possible

to beat someone to death.”

Xuan Yuan Po gave an exclamation of understanding before looking at his opponent, asking: “Are you ready?”

His opponent was from Huang Shan Valley (Yellow Mountain).

Huang Shan Valley was from the South.

Not all disciples from the Southern sects could participate in the Grand Examination, just as how the Capital would hold a foundation trial for the Grand Examination, the South would also have a similar pre-examination.

Passing the foundation trial was proof of this examinee’s ability, not to mention his time for passing the Martial Trial was shorter than most of the other examinees, attesting to the fact that his divine sense and True Essence capacity is better than most.

Previously, when he was picking his opponent, the examinee from Huang Shan Valley displayed a lot of difficulty in his decision, this was because Orthodox Academy’s fame was far too great, it didn’t represent a lack of confidence; not to mention, his final choice of Xuan Yuan Po meant that he had some confidence in being able to win against Xuan Yuan Po, or more specifically, a battle plan.

From the moment he entered the Tower of Purging Dust, Xuan Yuan Po had looked to the sky vacantly, then asked that question, the examinee from Huang Shan Valley didn’t know that he was naturally simple and honest and instead thought that he was

purposefully trying to degrade him.

The examinee was already in a bad mood and right now, he was furious, wanting nothing more than to immediately cut down this infuriating person.

“I’ve heard that you’re already crippled, so are you prepared to lose?”

The Huang Shan Valley disciple looked at Xuan Yuan Po and sneered.

Saying those words, he didn’t take the opportunity to strike first.

This was because everyone had heard this hulking yao youth say in a thunderous voice that he needed to attack first; needed to close in on his opponent.

He didn’t know whether if Xuan Yuan Po had intentionally done this to mislead him, or if he had really planned upon carrying out that strategy, but out of careful consideration, he had to consider a retreating defence; extending the distance between them, then relying upon astounding sword arts to brawl with this yao youth.

The Huang Shan Valley disciple retreated without hesitation, clearing a distance of about 17 metres in a single skip.

At the same time, his sword left its scabbard, drawing out an arc of wind that wrapped around in front of him, creating a quick defence.

Seeing this, Xuan Yuan Po was surprised, thinking: Tang Thirty-Six could predict everything?

Previously, while outside, Tang Thirty-Six had said to him that once the battle started, his opponent would retreat, that they would definitely defend, therefore, he didn't have to think of anything, all he had to do was advance, even if he had to burn out all his True Essence, he would still have to advance, no matter how his opponent's sword was manoeuvred or how their True Essence was to flow, no matter how impregnable, he just had to advance!

Xuan Yuan Po did exactly this.

When he had asked his opponent if they were ready and his opponent started retreating, he himself had immediately started advancing.

While he was feeling slightly startled with how Tang Thirty-Six had managed to predict everything and was starting to feel some admiration for that fellow, he had already advanced over 30 metres.

Tang Thirty-Six was too accurate in his prediction, his words were close to being a law: retreating, is never faster than advancing.

No one could have thought that someone as burly as Xuan Yuan Po could be so fast.

This was because no one knew that Xuan Yuan Po had often traversed steep and onerous mountain crags and cliffs from a young age, hunting red minks that were as fast as lightning.

A retreating defence? A brawl? With Tang Thirty-Six's advice, Xuan Yuan Po's opponent wouldn't have that type of opportunity.

When the Huang Shan Valley disciple retreated 17 odd metres, he had already advanced more than 30; he arrived before the opposing examinee.

He could clearly see, that the opponent's face was pale, he could even see his own inverted image upon his opponent's retina.

That disciple from Huang Shan Valley gave out a shrill cry, his blade rose like the wind, slashing towards Xuan Yuan Po, its edge carrying an elegant glow.

Xuan Yuan Po remembered Tang Thirty-Six's words: don't think about anything else, only think about advancing.

He enkindled all the True Essence he could muster and continued advancing.

His opponent's sword created a screen before themselves.

He paid it no heed and continued advancing.

His fist advanced even faster than his body.

A ringing sound reverberated.

The thrust of his fist carried with it the gleam of Star Brilliance, tearing through the sword gales and flickering upon the opponent's face.

The opponent's eyes reflected innumerable amounts of Star Brilliance, alongside immeasurable amounts of shock and disbelief.

Wasn't Xuan Yuan Po a new student of Star Seizer Academy? Hadn't he only joined Orthodox Academy a short time ago? Wasn't he last upon the proclamation? Wasn't his right arm crippled?

How could he release such a punch? That kind of Star Brilliance, wasn't it a phenomenon only those in the upper stage of the Meditation Realm could display?

The opponent couldn't continue with his line of thought.

That's because Xuan Yuan Po's fist had directly blown away his opponent's sword and landed on their body.

BANG!

That disciple from Huang Shan Valley crashed into the wall of

the tower heavily, flying like a boulder across tens of metres.

A gale tore through; dust abounded.

The disciple from Huang Shan Valley seemed to have been wedged into the wall, his clothing in tatters and his body covered in blood.

Xuan Yuan Po stilled his steps, looking at his fist, his expression a little dazed, thinking to himself: “why didn’t he block?”

The Tower of Purging Dust was filled with the sound of running feet.

Over ten examiners rushed to the grounds and hurriedly started to treat the disciple of Huang Shan Valley.

“You...”

One of the examiners rushed before Xuan Yuan Po, pointing at him, wanting to say something, but didn’t know what to say.

Xuan Yuan Po recognised the voice as to being the examiner who had previously answered him, he looked at his opponent who was currently undergoing emergency treatment and felt distressed, mumbling: “I didn’t do anything wrong? You said that no one can be beaten to death, if... if anything was to happen to him, it won’t have anything to do with me.”

Chapter 143 – First Match

Hearing Xuan Yuan Po's words, the examiner's expression immediately changed; the examiner impatiently waved their hand, indicating that he should hurry and leave.

Xuan Yuan Po felt baffled, thinking to himself, "don't you have to declare me as the winner? Will this match be acknowledged?" he looked towards the wall, at his opponent that was currently undergoing emergency treatment, shook his head then headed out of the tower in a daze.

Hearing the sound of the tower's door closing, the examiner wordlessly shook his head, thinking to himself: "that youth is only 13 years of age, how could he have so much strength? Even if yao had special bodies, this was still far too excessive."

Seeing Xuan Yuan Po walk down from the steps, the crowd didn't feel overly surprised; he was ranked upon the proclamation after all, defeating an unknown disciple from Huang Shan Valley was an obvious conclusion.

Except, they didn't expect the match to come to an end this quickly; it was even faster than the matches had by the four scholars from Scholartree Manor, there was also that thunder-like sound: what was it?

That's correct, the Tower of Purging Dust's silencing array wasn't able to isolate all noise, once a sound surpassed a certain volume, it could be transmitted outside of the tower; when Xuan Yuan Po's fist had sent the disciple from Huang Shan Valley flying, the fearsome sound of its impact had breached the limits of the silencing array, transmitting out of the tower to reach the ears of the other examinees, raising a bout of conjecture and debate.

Currently, the vast majority of examinees remaining at the match grounds were those who had won a match in the first round, in the coming second round, any of them might be matched against Xuan Yuan Po. The stares directed at Xuan Yuan Po began to turn a little cautious.

“What’s the current situation?” asked Tang Thirty-Six as he looked at Xuan Yuan Po, who had returned to the woodlands.

Xuan Yuan Po still hadn’t managed to comprehend what happened in the match, after thinking for a long while, he gestured and said: “He didn’t block.”

The simple and honest he, couldn’t understand how Tang Thirty-Six could predict everything in the duel. He thought that Tang Thirty-Six knew the Huang Shan Valley disciple and had arranged to have him to win, therefore, he currently didn’t feel excited and happy, but was feeling rather depressed and lost.

Tang Thirty-Six couldn’t have known what Xuan Yuan Po was wildly speculating, but he could roughly guess what had happened in the match after hearing his words.

Tang Thirty-Six gave a curt laugh and said: “It’s not that he didn’t block, he wasn’t able to block in time; battling is about momentum, his ability is below yours, but foolishly wanted to do a retreating defence while skirmishing; losing was an obvious conclusion, it was only a matter of when.”

At this moment, the discussions before the tower gradually

quietened down, this was because an examinee had walked out, he was number 61.

This examinee was from Heavenly Academy; Zhuang Huan Yu walked up to his side and spoke to him quietly.

The student from Heavenly Academy had a cloth bag tied behind him, unknown as to its contents. He had a look of indifference as he listened to Zhuang Huan Yu, but his stare was focused upon the direction of Orthodox Academy.

Zhuang Huan Yu finished what he was saying and left.

That student from Heavenly Academy looked at the group from Orthodox Academy, remaining quiet for some time before finally choosing Chen Chang Sheng.

That's correct, he had chosen Chen Chang Sheng.

The area before the Tower of Purging Dust was silent, everyone turned their gaze towards the woodlands.

This decision was rather unexpected, but upon further consideration, it was the most logical choice.

Su Mo Yu and Tang Thirty-Six were both listed upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds as rank 33 and 32 respectively, while Luo Luo occupied the lofty rank of being number 2 on the proclamation; no matter how that student of Heavenly Academy was to struggle, it would be impossible to win against these three. Even though Chen Chang Sheng was famous, he was the weakest amongst them; for the Heavenly Academy student, choosing him

would at least give the possibility of victory.

The Heavenly Academy student looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said: “I don’t believe you can beat me.”

When he said those words, he intentionally put on a calm demeanour, his expression was intentionally indifferent, but anyone could have made out the determination behind it.

The reason why it was determined, was obviously due to a lack of confidence, only through determination could he keep himself from thinking of certain things: things such as the Ivy League gathering; such as the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; such as the words: “renowned throughout the Capital”.

The woodlands were quiet.

Tang Thirty-Six looked at Chen Chang Sheng, wanting to say something, but didn’t in the end.

He didn’t continuously explain what needed to be concentrated upon in battle, like he had done so for Xuan Yuan Po previously, nor had he prepared a battle plan in advance; this was because even he, was unsure as to Chen Chang Sheng’s current condition.

In the end, he only asked one of the simplest questions possible: “Can you win?”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the student from Heavenly Academy; he went over the information on examinees that Minister Xin had secretly given to Orthodox Academy, remembering that this student was called Liu Chong Shan.

This student's ability was not poor, being at least in the middle stage of the Meditation Realm, it was also highly probable that they carried with them some sort of powerful item.

“There shouldn't be a problem.” he answered Tang Thirty-Six, after some consideration.

Hearing that answer, Tang Thirty-Six's expression relaxed somewhat, no longer worrying. He knew that Chen Chang Sheng was a careful and composed person, if he said there shouldn't be a problem, then there definitely wouldn't be a problem.

“Sir, use the Thousand Mile Button.” said Luo Luo quietly by the side.

She felt a little worried, even though she usually had confidence in Chen Chang Sheng, to the point of being a little fanatical, this match was far too important for him. With his results in the Academic Exam, as long as he could defeat the student from Heavenly Academy, his chances of entering the Three Grades was high, obtaining the privilege of entering the Mausoleum of Books.

Tang Thirty-Six heard her words and thought to himself: “what kind of person is this?”

Thousand Mile Buttons could be considered a legendary level item; even if you were to encounter some expert at the upper stage of the Star Fusion realm, it could save your life; its value was easy to imagine.

All cultivators, no matter how much they may want to get their

hands on one would have much difficulty in its procurement, how could Luo Luo tell Chen Chang Sheng to use it on a regular match, wasn't this just too wasteful?

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Luo Luo, saying: "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Finishing those words, he headed for the Tower of Purging Dust; under the lead of the Li Palace clergyman he entered the tower alongside the student from Heavenly Academy.

Looking at the door that was once again closed, the examinees remained silent, their expressions complex, unknown as to what they were thinking.

Within the tower, the round eaves looked akin to the opening of a well; the blue skies above looked especially distant.

Chen Chang Sheng and that student named Liu Chong Shan were also distant from each other, they each stood at two ends of the ground within the tower, staring at each other from a distance.

"I must admit that I cannot compare with you in terms of knowledge, but in the end, battling is reliant upon actual strength; I really want to know, have you successfully completed your Purification?"

Liu Chong Shan looked at him indifferently while asking, his seemingly steady voice hid a hint of derision.

As with the hidden determination in his voice earlier, this was a method for bolstering his confidence.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't look up towards the blue sky and lose his concentration like Xuan Yuan Po had, nor did he look towards the second floor in search of the examiner.

From the moment he entered the tower, he had calmly kept his eyes on his opponent, focused and calm; he slowly spread out his divine sense and his True Essence started flowing within his meridians, though it was unable to flow freely, it was enough to warm the trunk of his body.

He answered: "It's completed."

Today at the Grand Examination, many had guessed or could tell that he had completed his Purification; completing Purification was only the entry to cultivation and did not constitute some sort of secret weapon, therefore, it wasn't anything worth hiding.

Liu Chong Shan replied: "Really? I clearly remember that you hadn't completed it at the time of the Ivy League gathering, even if you have finished your Purification, it shouldn't have been long ago?"

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a while, replying: "That's correct, it hasn't been long."

"Having only completed your Purification recently, you must not even know how to Meditate and self-observe. I really want to

know, how can you win against me; without enough ability, no matter how famous you are, what use is it?" Liu Chong Shan looked at him while talking, with a hint of mockery in his voice.

Liu Chong Shan reached behind himself with his right hand and untied the cloth bag, from within, he retrieved an umbrella that he opened out in front of himself.

It seemed to be a normal oil-paper umbrella, yet, upon opening, its outer face immediately let out countless dazzling rays, looking akin to precious yellow jade, meanwhile, some immense aura faintly flowed within, it was clearly not just some regular tool. Due to Liu Chong Shan being too young, his cultivation was insufficient for utilising the umbrella's full power; however, for something like the Grand Examination, there were very few examinees that could break through it using their own strength. This umbrella was his last resort; he couldn't have imagined that he would matchup against Chen Chang Sheng in the first match; for safety's sake, he took out the item without any hesitation.

Chen Chang Sheng gave the umbrella only a glance and didn't pay it any further attention, focusing his attention within himself as well as he could.

Within his broken meridians, flowed a small amount of True Essence, under the influence of his vast divine sense, his attention became ever more heightened, yet strangely, ever more calm. At the same time, a hard to describe energy began emitting from the innermost part of his body's bones, his organs, extending to every part of his body, bringing with it a certain feeling – that feeling was very profound, hard to express in words; it wasn't a

sense of feeling powerful, borne from the enormity of the energy; it was a feeling that even if the energy was to be small and weak, it would still be enough to make someone feel boundlessly strong and confident, akin to some sort of instinct.

He was no stranger to this feeling.

That day, in the underground space, he had entered a coma after forcefully undergoing meditation, upon awakening, he had found that he had another source of energy within his body, another presence, alongside a strong feeling of confidence.

Due to not being able to meet Venerable Elder Black Dragon again, he still didn't know what had happened that day, but he knew that his body had undergone some sort of inexplicable transformation; his speed and physical strength had risen to some fearsome degree, even the most perfect of Purifications would have been just as such.

The important thing was, no one knew of his transformation.

"Come," said Liu Chong Shan indifferently while looking at him, the umbrella in front of Liu Chong Shan let out a powerful aura.

His "come", was Chen Chang Sheng's "go".

Chen Chang Shen considered how he should advance, how should he "go", how could he "go" faster, he then remembered that day where he had jumped from the second floor down to the

snow covered ground and leapt to the lakeside.

He lifted his right leg and stepped towards the ground.

Only a single sound could be heard resounding; that sound was very hard to describe, akin to an iron anvil that had been heated to the point of being red hot and then covered with a pot of water.

A sizzling crackle could be heard.

Chen Chang Sheng's foot landed upon the ground.

His tough leather boot, immediately ripped apart.

The sand underneath, akin to something escaping for dear life, scattered out, revealing the bare ground beneath that was made of stone.

Several cracks, with his right foot as the centre, spread out across the Tower of Purging Dust.

All of this happened within a time shorter than it would take to blink.

In charge of the Duelling Stage were numerous Li Palace clergy, amongst these clergy, some were in charge of its operation, some were invigilators, some were in charge of medical treatment, while some were tasked with various chores; there wasn't a need for all

of them to stay within the tower and previously, there were many that had stayed outside, but at this moment, they were all located inside the tower.

They were all standing on the second floor, quietly watching the duel, the clergy were all very curious as to the ability of this youth from Orthodox Academy, of whom, His Eminence, The Archbishop, had high hopes for.

Was he like the rumours said, someone unable to cultivate? Or was he like those legendary figures, someone that will suddenly display an unconceivable amount of power.

Seeing Chen Chang Sheng's foot step onto the sand covered ground and what happened subsequently, the expressions of all the clergy on the second floor, instantly changed, this was because the power displayed by that youth from Orthodox Academy exceeded their imagination.

This wasn't to say that his True Essence capacity was overly abundant, in fact, they could clearly sense that Chen Chang Sheng's capacity was very average, maybe even a little deficient, but for him to be able to shatter the ground within His Holiness' miniature world with a single step, just what kind of Purification did he undergo? How could he possibly possess such a terrifying strength?

An incredibly fearsome energy, travelled from the ground back to Chen Chang Sheng's body; sand rose up and filled the air.

His figure broke through the sand; his dark coloured uniform leaving behind a clear afterimage, looking akin to a Black Dragon.

Cries of alarm that could no longer be repressed by the Li Palace clergy, erupted from the second floor.

The cries were quickly drowned out by an even shriller, or perhaps, mournful sounding howl.

This was because Chen Chang Sheng's speed was too fast, his body grinded against the air; as if the very air itself was being split apart, it let out a sound that was very similar to that of a Dragon Roar.

In an instant, he closed in before Liu Chong Shan.

Liu Chong Shan didn't have a reaction, he didn't even have time to think; even his mouth, which was in the motions of dropping due to his shock had only managed to reach the state of being half open.

Chen Chang Sheng's fist had already landed upon the umbrella.

That umbrella let out countless rays of light, emitting a powerful aura.

In the next moment, the umbrella's light instantly faded, returning to being dull and lifeless.

That's because the powerful aura was forcibly suppressed by an even greater, even purer energy.

That powerful energy came from Chen Chang Sheng's fist.

With a single sound, the umbrella flew away alongside the gale of Chen Chang Sheng's fist.

His fist continued advancing, squarely landing upon Liu Chong Shan's chest.

With a loud bang, Liu Chong Shan's body sprung up like a boulder, flying out tens of metres and smashing into the sturdy tower wall.

That stone wall had an extremely faint crack.

Previously, Xuan Yuan Po had sent the disciple from Huang Shan Valley flying with a single punch; that person had smashed into that spot.

Right now, Liu Chong Shan had smashed into the exact same spot.

In the same way, it had only taken a single punch.

Liu Chong Shan spewed out blood as he fainted.

From the start of the match, he had only said a single word to Chen Chang Sheng derisively: "Come."

Therefore, Chen Chang Sheng came.

Then, he had fallen.

From start to finish, he had only said that one word.

He hadn't even time to let out a single move.

The Tower of Purging Dust was dead silent.

Chen Chang Sheng withdrew his fist, standing straight, he then looked towards the second floor.

The clergy who had been shocked into a daze met his stare, bringing them back to their senses, they rushed down to give treatment.

The clergyman who was presiding over the matches walked before Chen Chang Sheng, wanting to ask something, in the end, they didn't say anything.

Chen Chang Sheng had a calm expression as he did a formal gesture towards the clergyman before turning around and leaving the tower.

Staring at his fading back, that clergyman struggled to settle himself, thinking: "why are the students of Orthodox Academy

all... so simple and violent?”

Chapter 144 – What Did You Do In Your Past Life

A punch, it was once again, only a single punch. Without any sort of form, ignoring any sort of tool and without any manifestation of True Essence, only raw strength and speed; what was this?

It had to be known that Orthodox Academy didn't used to be like this. In the past, both teachers and students alike were transcendent in their cultivation arts; their actions were unworldly, filled with the flair of those who followed the Dao.

This year, with the academy once again accepting new students, it embodied a lot for the older members of the Orthodoxy; they had thought that a period of over a decade, was only akin to a speck of dust within the endless sands of time and that many things remained unchanged.

As long as Orthodox Academy returned, they would once again be able to see its past visage. Who then, could have guessed, that the current academy was no longer the one they had in their thoughts; even though Xuan Yuan Po and Chen Chang Sheng had managed to obtain victory, Orthodox Academy's old demeanour was no longer present.

Having such thoughts, what that clergyman and the other examiners within the Tower of Purging Dust currently felt, was understandably a little complicated.

Suspended mid-air, within the Hall of Zhao Wen, was a mirror, its lower right corner was decorated with the image of several leaves.

The mirror displayed an image of the Tower of Purging Dust;

everyone gathered within the hall were observing the image of Chen Chang Sheng's fading back as he left the tower, looking at that slowly closing door, they couldn't stop themselves from having the same feelings.

Prince Chen Liu; Mo Yu; His Eminence, Mei Li Sha; the principals and Bishops of the Ivy League schools; the military representatives, Xue Xing Chuan and Xu Shi Ji; His Grace, Zhou Tong, who was sitting by himself in a corner; several representatives from some sects of the South; at this moment, a lot of important figures were present.

They were all currently looking towards the principal of Heavenly Academy, Mao Qiu Yu, his student had just lost miserably by the hand of Chen Chang Sheng, some of them recognised the oil paper umbrella as to being the one Mao Qiu Yu had carried with him in his younger years, when he journeyed across the continent.

They thought to themselves that his current mood must be terrible; yet, it was different from what they thought, his face didn't show any anger, but was calm.

Seeing nothing upon Mao Qiu Yu's face, their gazes unconsciously switched to His Eminence, The Archbishop, but they found that His Eminence's eyes remained closed, as if he were asleep; this was naturally a display of confidence towards Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy.

Previously, some thought that this confidence would turn into a farce, but who could have guessed that Chen Chang Sheng would attain such a clean victory in his first match, causing them to worry that they might themselves become the farcical party.

Whether the examiners at the Tower of Purging Dust or the important figures in the Hall of Zhao Wen that were observing via

the mirror, they were all surprised by Chen Chang Sheng's performance; they couldn't understand, this youth from Orthodox Academy had only completed his Purification a short time ago and his True Essence capacity was very ordinary, yet, why did he possess such an astonishing amount of strength?

“His strength has nothing to do with his True Essence capacity, it should either be due to an extremely flawless Purification, or he has managed to have some sort of extraordinary encounter over the past few days; that is a pure and absolute strength.”

Ranked second amongst the Divine Generals on the continent, Xue Xing Chuan was someone that has experienced countless battles, his understanding of strength was especially profound; seeing the puzzled expressions of everyone present, he calmly explained.

When he said those words he gave a glance towards the Archbishop, a Purification that approached perfection was very rare, while an extraordinary encounter could hardly be called “extraordinary” if it happened often; in his mind, no matter how Chen Chang Sheng had obtained this pure and absolute strength, it had to be something bestowed upon him by His Eminence, The Archbishop.

However, for Chen Chang Sheng to be able to accept and incorporate this bestowal was not something easily achieved. Xue Xing Chuan looked towards the expressionless Xu Shi Ji on his left and thought to himself: “This kind of son-in-law, though lacking in comparison to Qiu Shan Jun, is still fairly adequate.”

As Her Divine Majesty's two most trusted Divine Generals within

the military, he wondered whether if he should advise Xu Shi Ji a little, at a more convenient time.

Chen Chang Sheng's display of unexpected strength caused the hall to quieten down, once Xue Xing Chuan finished his words, no one said anything else for a long while, until finally, Mo Yu's cold voice broke the silence.

“You won't get very far by relying upon strength alone.”

The hall was once again silent, everyone knew that her words were true – without reaching the appropriate level and realm, without sufficient True Essence, even with a greater strength, it could only be effective in low level battles; upon meeting a higher level, a higher realm, it would be directly crushed.

If Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any other methods available, he could definitely be unable to reach the end of the Duelling Stage and might very well lose in the next round.

.....

.....

That mournful howl transmitted out of the Tower of Purging Dust.

All of the examinees present immediately had a change to their expressions, not knowing what was happening within the tower. Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue's had stern faces, it was evident that these two young experts who had already achieved Ethereal Opening, had a clearer perception of what was happening.

Not long after, the tower's door once again opened and Chen Chang Sheng walked out, all that could be seen was that his right foot was bare, his boot having disappeared, making him look rather haggard; apart from this, he didn't show any signs of having had a hard battle, as if he had only entered the tower for a brief stroll.

The area was silent, none of the examinees said anything, the mood was complex; their gazes followed his movement, staring as he walked down the stone steps, all the way to the woodlands.

"You did it," Tang Thirty-Six extended his hand and pat him on the shoulder in praise.

Xuan Yuan Po looked at him without saying a word, his eyes full of respect.

Su Mo Yu thought to himself, even though the student from Heavenly Academy was of an ordinary level and couldn't have been considered strong – if he himself was to battle, he would have also had an easy victory – it would have been difficult to win as fast as Chen Chang Sheng had; it seems the conjecturing some of his peers had done before the Grand Examination were correct, Chen Chang Sheng had been hiding his ability all along.

Luo Luo laughed happily, the sound of her laughter rang out clearly, like the ringing of a silver bell.

The little girl wanted to help Chen Chang Sheng wipe away his

perspiration, but found none present, therefore, she felt an even greater sense of pride and elation, thinking to herself that her esteemed teacher really wasn't a regular person, as she had thought some months ago.

She really wanted to know how Chen Chang Sheng had defeated his opponent, therefore, she asked: Chen Chang Sheng gave a brief description of what happened, without going into too much detail.

Xuan Yuan Po passed the two superb grade crystals towards Chen Chang Sheng, whom shook his head, indicating that he won't use them; he hadn't expended much True Essence in the previous match and had no need to replenish himself.

The examinees' stares remained on Chen Chang Sheng. Not long ago, he was still a beginner in cultivation who was unable to complete his Purification, today he had easily won against the principal of Heavenly Academy's personal disciple. Logically speaking, they should be displaying a greater sense of shock, but from the Ivy League gathering to the update of the proclamation, to His Eminence's subsequent declaration; Chen Chang Sheng had already been ushered to some lofty position. Though no one had any proof, they felt that he had to be hiding some sort of power; therefore, they already had some sort of preparation or perhaps anticipation, thus, even though they were currently shocked, it wasn't to the point of losing control.

They were more concerned about his real level and the method he had used to defeat that Heavenly Academy student in such a short amount of time; those young cultivators with keen eyes, such as Gou Han Shi, had already recognised that the umbrella was a

powerful item.

Up to this point, Chen Chang Sheng was thankful that today's first round was held behind closed doors and that the loser was escorted out of the Education Palace, without being able to inform their fellow students any details of the battling, keeping the winner's methods unknown; this greatly benefited towards keeping his secret and methods safe.

The Grand Examination continued, the 62nd examinee helplessly chose Su Mo Yu as their opponent, while the next examinee chose Tang Thirty-Six, these two matches proceeded without any mishaps and both, Su Mo Yu and Tang Thirty-Six obtained victory.

Outside of the tower, the examinees could faintly hear the second losing examinee angrily wailing a few cries of it being unfair; they had clearly performed fairly well in the Martial Trial and placed in the upper half, but had been matched against young geniuses such as Su Mo Yu and Tang Thirty-Six, this was indeed hard to deem as to being "fair", yet all that could be said was that those two examinee's were unlucky.

The first round had finally reached its final moments, the last examinee looked towards the presiding Li Palace clergyman and said: "Her Highness' name will not be counted within the final results, how will this be handled?"

That examinee had a downcast look upon their face, eliciting sympathy from anyone that saw it.

The Li Palace clergyman replied with an expressionless face: “That isn’t something any of you need to concern yourselves with”

That examinee felt helpless, turning around towards Luo Luo, gesturing a formal greeting and saying: “A challenge, Your Highness.”

Sounds of clapping could be heard from the crowd, in this type of situation, facing against someone such as Luo Luo, that examinee didn’t give up or concede defeat, this was indeed something worth applauding.

Sadly, whether if it was worthy of applause or sympathy, it couldn’t affect the final outcome.

Within the Tower of Purging Dust, a deafening sound exploded, akin to some mountain being toppled.

In the next moment, Luo Luo walked out from the tower, walked before Chen Chang Sheng, her small face full of delight and said: “Sir, I also used only a single punch.”

She wasn’t gloating – Second upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, amongst the younger generation of cultivators, this was already a pinnacle; defeating an ordinary examinee wasn’t something worth gloating over. The reason for her delight was because she had used the same method as Chen Chang Sheng to finish the duel.

Xuan Yuan Po, Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo had all used but a single punch to finish their respective matches; the examinees outside of the tower had heard three separate sounds: Thunder; a Dragon Howl; a toppling mountain.

Tang Thirty-Six didn't use his fist, he had directly used the most powerful move from the Three Forms of Wen Shui, at that time, the examinees outside of the tower had heard the sound of his blade leaking out and thought it was the surging sound of a flooding river.

“Is that really necessary?” Guan Fei Bai said, as he looked at the three youths and the single girl by the woodlands, his brow twitching.

If he and his other three fellow disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect had needed to participate in this round of duelling, they would naturally perform similarly to the group from Orthodox Academy, perhaps ending their matches even quicker, causing an even bigger scene; however, like he had said, did they really need to create such a large scene?

No matter how it was for observers or how they thought, the four students from Orthodox Academy had all passed the first round of the Duelling Stage; the 64 examinees that were to enter the second round had all been selected.

Some of the examinees were very confident of their results in the Academic Exam, their total outcome should be enough for them to place within the top 43; with their aim of entering the Three Grades in the Grand examination complete, they naturally relaxed,

their faces revealing a happy smile.

Some of the examinees knew that their results in the Academic Exam would be mediocre; they became ever more nervous and quiet. They even worried that if they wanted to enter the Three Grades, they might need to achieve better results in the Duelling Stage, at least requiring another victory in order to have any hope. Yet, the duelling was akin to cultivation, the further you go, the stronger your opponents become, wanting to advance another step became increasingly difficult.

There was a short break after the first round had completed, examinees sat in various places outside of the tower, eating some of the provisions they had brought with them, some of the examinees made use of the time to meditate and replenish their True Essence.

Lady Official Li brought several handmaidens with her to the Tower of Purging Dust, spreading out a tablecloth and laying out several dishes of fine food; they were all staying here with Luo Luo in the Education Palace and it was perhaps due to this, that none of the clergy attempted to stop them.

Was this the Grand Examination or was it a picnic? Seeing this scene by the woodlands, the examinees felt the provisions within their mouths become increasingly bland, feelings of envy abounded, especially upon see Her Highness half kneel by Chen Chang Sheng's side, using her ebony chopsticks to feed him roast meat; the envy naturally began escalating into feelings of resentment.

Guan Fei Bai looked towards that direction, melancholy saying:

“That Chen Chang Sheng must have saved humanity in his past life.”

Gou Han Shi laughed and said: “Then the first thing he saved must have been White Emperor City.”

Chapter 145 – Drawing Lots

Chen Chang Sheng didn't notice the stares that were falling upon him.

Since Luo Luo entered Li Palace, he hadn't enjoyed this type of pampering for quite some time, having returned to it once again, he quickly adjusted and became accustomed to the treatment; not to mention, he was currently pondering something and thus, lacking in concentration.

For the Academic Exam, he had confidence in placing at least within the top 3, the problem was, Gou Han Shi would probably also place within the top 3; even Tian Hai Sheng Xue's results shouldn't be poor, with these things in mind, if he wanted to place first upon the First Banner then he had to at least enter the final match in the Duelling Stage.

This meant he had to win another 5 matches. Of course, if Gou Han Shi, Tian Hai Sheng Xue and the four scholars from Scholartree Manor who had been amongst the last to hand in their papers were all to be eliminated early, then the pressure he faced would be greatly reduced. The problem was, he couldn't see this as to being something that could possibly happen.

Guan Fei Bai, Liang Ban Hu and Qi Jian were all potential opponents, there was also Zhuang Huan Yu, who had remained particularly quiet today; the one who made Chen Chang Sheng feel the most anxious and cautious however, had to be that youth that didn't mingle with the crowd.

That wolf-tribe youth didn't have any results in the academic phase, therefore, no matter what their results were to be in the duelling phase, it would not be enough to place first upon the First

Banner; hence, he wasn't in a direct competition with that youth, but what if he were to match up with that youth in one of the next few matches?

No one wanted to match up against that youth early on; Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue should also be the same in their thinking.

The short resting interval quickly came to an end, Lady Official Li and the handmaidens cleared up the food boxes and left the match grounds.

The second round to the Duelling Stage was about to start and the area before the Tower of Purging Dust gradually quietened down. In comparison to the first round, the mood was even more restive and tense, this was because the first 15 examinees were going to enter this round of matches.

The first 15 examinees to cross the River Qu were all very strong: there were the four from Li Shan Sword Sect; two from Star Seizer Academy; one senior from Holy Maiden Peak; Tian Hai Sheng Xue, who was standing at the fore with a look of cold indifference; and Zhuang Huan Yu, who was quietly standing beside a fellow student.

That wolf-tribe youth name Zhe Xiu stood on the outskirts of the group, solitary as always; only one person that didn't know anyone.

The second round had more or less the same rules as the first, only majorly differing on two points:

Firstly, opponents were no longer chosen by the higher ranked examinee, nor was it decided by the examiner; it was to be decided through the method of drawing lots, also, following rounds would each have a separate lot drawing; the opponent an examinee would

face, was left entirely up to fate.

Secondly, starting from the second round, the loser will no longer be escorted out of the Education Palace, but will stay at the match grounds; this was because there were only 64 examinees left, in order to confirm who would enter the Three Grades – the examiners couldn't ensure that marking would be absolutely fair – the losers might have to compete in a second tournament.

Before the matches, lots were drawn. From a certain perspective, the drawing of lots was even more important than the actual matches, if one could draw a relatively weak opponent, it would essentially mean passing the round, but if one was to be unlucky enough to draw an opponent like Gou Han Shi, what could you do?

Dozens of gazes followed the hand of the clergyman who was in charge of the lot drawing as it left the box, before finally resting upon the slip that had an examinee's name written within.

“Orthodox Academy, Xuan Yuan Po,” the clergyman then picked out a second slip, glanced at it and said: “Against Li Shan Sword Sect, Gou Han Shi.”

The area before the tower was dead silent, it took a long period of time before any of the examinees gave a reaction; multiple cries of exclamation arose.

Since Qiu Shan Jun unexpectedly didn't enter this year's Grand Examination, in everyone's eyes, the strongest participant this year was unquestionably Gou Han Shi. They all naturally assumed

his name would appear much later, who could have guessed that in the very first match, the examiner would have drawn his name.

The emotion behind those exclamations were complex, apart from shock, there was also a lot of joy; within the small exclamations of shock, there was also the sense of taking joy in someone's misery.

Just as how no one wanted to go against that wolf-tribe youth, no one wanted to match up against Gou Han Shi.

Currently, they didn't have to worry anymore, this was because Gou Han Shi's opponent was Xuan Yuan Po; Orthodox Academy's Xuan Yuan Po.

The woodlands were very quiet, Chen Chang Sheng and Tang Thirty-Six looked at Xuan Yuan Po, their eyes didn't reveal any sympathy, but seemed to be questioning.

At a time like this, sympathy was meaningless.

Xuan Yuan Po was bewildered, asking: "What should I do?"

Tang Thirty-Six said: "Can't you see that we're waiting for you to make a decision?"

Xuan Yuan Po looked towards Luo Luo and said: "Master, I'll listen to you."

Luo Luo looked towards Chen Chang Sheng and said: “Sir, what do you think?”

Chen Chang Sheng looked towards Tang Thirty-Six and said: “Why don’t you give a suggestion?”

Tang Thirty-Six didn’t even pause for thought, raising his hand and directly calling out to the clergyman who was in charge of drawing the lots: “We concede.”

The match grounds were in an uproar, no one had imagined that Orthodox Academy would choose to immediately concede the match the moment the lot was drawn, this was far too quick and decisive, or perhaps better described as thick-skinned and shameless? Sounds of ridicule could be heard from the crowd, Xuan Yuan Po lowered his head, his figure a little destitute.

Chen Chang Sheng comforted him: “Preserving your strength will allow you to have a small advantage in the second tournament.”

Tang Thirty-Six handled external affairs, looking at the examinees who were laughing incessantly, he said: “Conceding means surrendering? You’re all so great, why don’t we give the name slip to you and you can go fight Gou Han Shi instead?”

Passing on the lot that was drawn was obviously not allowed, but his words reminded a lot of the examinees that if your aim was to enter the Three Grades, then, were you to match up against a

strong opponent like Gou Han Shi, whom you couldn't defeat, conceding the match might be the best option; thinking that they themselves might be the next one to concede a match, the examinees began quieting down.

The drawing continued, the calm atmosphere once again disappeared upon the clergyman drawing the names of Tang Thirty-Six and Liang Ban Hu.

The examinees all looked towards the woodlands, no one laughed at Orthodox Academy; they had started to feel a little sorry for the academy.

Tang Thirty-Six had a calm expression, but his mood was atrocious, using a voice only those beside him could hear, he said: "Your mother, what kind of luck is this?"

Xuan Yuan Po matching against Gou Han Shi, this was the worst kind of luck, for him to match against Liang Ban Hu was not really any better.

The drawing of lots had only just started, yet two people from Orthodox Academy had already been matched against two members of the Divine State's Seven Laws, who were widely acknowledged as to being the strongest. No matter how this was looked at, Orthodox Academy was clearly down on its luck today.

The academy's bad luck didn't end here.

The slip with Chen Chang Sheng's name was drawn by the Li Palace clergyman, the clergyman then drew the name of his

opponent.

Scholartree Manor, Huo Guang.

The match grounds were once again in an uproar, at this moment, even those who held an especially dim view of Orthodox Academy were in no mood to relish their misery.

The most shocking result, was the last.

Luo Luo's opponent was... Tian Hai Sheng Xue.

The area before the tower was dead silent, the lot drawer's voice was especially clear.

Everyone looked at the Orthodox Academy group by the woodlands while being shocked to the point of being speechless.

The group from Orthodox Academy were also shocked to the point of being speechless.

At this moment, everyone could be certain that this type of result in the drawing of lots was definitely unrelated to luck, it was an intentional blow to Orthodox Academy; this was because the probability of this happening due to chance was far too low.

Xuan Yuan Po could only concede defeat upon being matched against Gou Han Shi.

Tang Thirty-Six was already famous, renowned as a young genius, but his ability was still far from that of Liang Ban Hu's and would probably have little chance of winning.

For the third match... though that scholar from Scholartree Manor, named Huo Guang, was not ranked upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, according to his performance in the martial phase, he should be the second strongest amongst the four scholars of Scholartree Manor; stronger than his two fellow students who are listed on the proclamation and only weaker than Zhong Hui, whom was listed at rank 9.

Even if Chen Chang Sheng was to have an extraordinary encounter, he couldn't possibly be able to win against his opponent.

The most obvious bit of evidence was the result of Luo Luo's drawing; for her, whom is second upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, the only ones she was cautious of were those who had already completed their Ethereal Opening, such as Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue, yet, she was matched up against Tian Hai Sheng Xue.

Not to mention, amongst all the examinees present, only Tian Hai Sheng Xue had a family background that was comparable to hers, at least to the point of being able to display his true abilities in battle against her.

As with the area before the Tower of Purging Dust, the Hall of Zhao Wen was similarly silent.

His Eminence, The Archbishop, finally opened his eyes slowly; his slightly cloudy eyes rested upon the slip that was displayed upon the mirror, slowly turning in a cold, frosty gaze.

Mo Yu had her eyes slightly lowered, thinking about something.

Prince Chen Liu had twitching brows; his face full of anger.

Xue Xing Chuan was slightly surprised; he turned around and gave Xu Shi Ji a single glance.

Xu Shi Ji was expressionless, maintaining his silence.

The other important figures within the hall also maintained their silence.

None of the important figures gathered at the Hall of Zhao Wen were fools, how would they not be able to tell that the results were due to manipulation?

Clearly, the Education Board's biased leaning towards Orthodox Academy had finally resulted in rousing discontent from the new faction within the Orthodoxy. Having endured all this time, they finally started their counterattack in the final phase of the Grand Examination, it was only unknown as to if they had gained personal approval from either Her Divine Majesty or His Holiness, The Pope.

“Using Southerners to fight against Orthodox Academy, this is far too unsightly.”

Heavenly Academy's principal, Mao Qiu Yu sighed, rising up and heading out of the hall.

Hearing those words, some, within the hall, such as Li Palace College's principal and two Bishop's, started to show mildly embarrassed expressions on their faces.

Mao Qiu Yu's status was high, he could say what he wanted, leave as he wanted, yet, he was still incapable of changing the results to the lot drawing.

The Grand Examination had to continue, the drawing of lots also had to continue.

The four matches of Orthodox Academy were obviously the ones to catch everyone's attention.

For the famous young experts, Guan Fei Bai and Zhuang Huan Yu, the opponents they drew were rather weak, only Su Mo Yu's luck was even worse than Chen Chang Sheng's group, his opponent was... the youth named Zhe Xiu.

Hearing the Li Palace clergyman's calling of names, a lot of the examinees finally came to know of that wolf-tribe youth's full name.

That youth was called Wo Fu Zhe Xiu.

The surname Wo Fu was very rare and obvious as to not belonging to someone from the central plains; it was probably from some small tribe on the outer frontier.

Tang Thirty-Six patted Su Mo Yu on the shoulder and said: "You should just concede defeat; who told you to stand with us back there, bad luck is something that is contagious."

Was it really due to luck? Of course it wasn't, everyone present before the tower knew this, yet, it was the same as the first round; without any evidence of manipulation, you can't raise any objections.

You can only concede defeat or attempt to achieve an inconceivable victory.

Tang Thirty-Six recommended Su Mo Yu pick the former, yet he himself had chosen the latter.

Luo Luo and Chen Chang Sheng had also made the same choice.

Chapter 146 – Discussing The Sword

No matter what Tang Thirty-Six was to say, Su Mo Yu naturally had his own judgement and choice; as the representative of Li Palace College, he couldn't concede defeat. Not to mention his stubborn and stiff personality had already made a decision for him; it didn't matter that his opponent was the mysterious and strong wolf-tribe youth, he still wouldn't lose confidence.

He did a formal gesture towards the examiner who was in charge of the duelling phase and then walked to the top of the stone steps before the Tower of Purging Dust.

The crowd slowly parted and Zhe Xiu walked over; he didn't still his steps at all and walked straight into the tower.

The examinees all looked at that youth's frail looking image with varying expressions upon their faces; from morning till now, apart from that single dialogue with the examiner, no one had heard that youth speak another word.

Everyone was very curious as to what level this wolf-tribe youth, whom was famous for being mysterious and cold-blooded, had reached and what type of person he was.

As for this match's outcome, they were not overly concerned with, this was because in a lot of people's eyes, the outcome was already decided; as 33rd upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, Su Mo Yu was obviously not weak, but his opponent was just too strong.

Chen Chang Sheng turned and gave a glance towards Luo Luo, who seemed to be contemplating something, he thought back to when they had entered the Education Palace and that single glance

the wolf-tribe youth had turned his head for and the mental assault it had given him in that instant.

He thought to himself that Luo Luo's duel against Tian Hai Sheng Xue might actually be a good thing, at least she wouldn't have to go against that youth and wouldn't be in any danger.

The wooden door to the Tower of Purging Dust slowly closed.

It didn't take long for it once again open.

The examinees felt a little bewildered, even though they knew that this match shouldn't hold any surprises, for it to end so quickly was still shocking.

The first one to walk out of the tower and hence, the winner, was the wolf-tribe youth.

He stood upon the stone steps and looked towards the woodlands, towards Orthodox Academy.

Throughout the Grand Examination, that youth had either stood apart from the rest of the crowd or at the front of the group, mostly leaving behind nothing more than the image of his back. At this moment, it was actually the first time for many to see his frontal image.

He wore a single, thin piece of clothing, with a cloth belt strapped across his waist and his feet bare; his trousers stopped three inches above his ankles, extremely terse.

He didn't carry any weapons on him, but he still gave off an aura of extreme danger, akin to an unsheathed blade, no, he was a blade's edge; indeed, his danger was not in the form of being actualised, but in the form of a feeling, as if your eyes will begin to feel a piercing pain if you stared at him for too long.

A lot of the examinees subconsciously withdrew their gazes or turned away, looking elsewhere.

Momentarily after, the wooden door slowly closed, Su Mo Yu didn't come out.

The examinees were surprised, one of them couldn't control themselves and asked: "Wasn't it said that the loser can stay?"

The Li Palace clergyman gave Zhe Xiu a glance, slightly furrowed his brows and then answered the examinee: "Su Mo Yu was injured too severely, he has been sent out of the palace for treatment."

Hearing those words, the area was covered by a wake of silence, the examinees had trouble controlling their complex emotions, once again turning their gazes towards that wolf-tribe youth.

Their gazes were filled with shock and even greater amounts of fear.

Su Mo Yu is an elite student of Li Palace College, a young genius that is ranked 33rd upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, even if

he wasn't an equal to this person, with the match being so short and under the observation of so many examiners that were undoubtedly present, for this person to injure Su Mo Yu to such an extent was a testament to how strong this person is.

Within the Hall of Zhao Wen, the principal of Li Palace College stared at the scene displayed upon the mirror, his face was extremely gloomy.

At this time, the match in the Tower of Purging Dust had already finished, the mirror only showed a plethora of yellow sand, this was the ground, on the lower edge there were a few leaf patterns and some patches of blood stains.

Su Mo Yu had sustained exceedingly severe injuries, there shouldn't be any fear for his life, but it was unknown as to if it would affect his future cultivation.

As the principal of Li Palace College, he had enough reason to be angry, but he didn't know in what way could he vent this anger.

Zhe Xiu and Su Mo Yu's duel had started too quickly and ended even faster, not just the clergy that were observing the scene from the second floor, even if he were to be present himself, he would not have been able to stop the tragedy that just happened, not unless he was already on the ground.

The drawing of lots for Orthodox Academy's four students had drawn the strongest opponents, this result was due to manipulation, he clearly knew the reason behind this.

Su Mo Yu is a student of Li Palace College they have high hopes for; meeting a monster like Zhe Xiu in the second round, it could only be said that Su Mo Yu had terrible luck.

Su Mo Yu was eliminated from the tournament due to injury, no matter how outstanding his results were to be in the academic phase, he would only be able to enter the Third Grade, wanting to advance further will no longer be possible.

All of the students from Li Palace College had been eliminated, not mentioning comparisons to Li Shan Sword Sect or Scholartree Manor; Star Seizer Academy still had four people left, how should this make him feel?

Li Palace College's principal had an ashen face as he stood up, he flicked his sleeve and left the Hall of Zhao Wen, no longer interested in how the examination would progress.

Heavenly Academy's principal, Mao Qiu Yu had already left due to being displeased with how certain important figures were secretly manipulating results of the lot drawing to push Orthodox Academy into a bleak state.

At this moment, within the hall, only three principals from the six Ivy League schools remained.

The second round continued, gales of fists and raining swords continued, True Essence abounded chaotically; these were events happening within the Tower of Purging Dust and thus, rarely leaked out of the tower.

In the next few matches, Zhuang Huan Yu easily won against his opponent; Qi Jian and Guan Fei Bai from Li Shan Sword Sect also quickly gained their entry into the third round. The next person to enter the stage was that scholar from Scholartree Manor.

The youngest of the four from Scholartree Manor who were participating in this year's Grand Examination, yet the strongest, Zhong Hui.

Standing upon the stone steps before the tower, looking at the scene of the match grounds, his expression became a little unsightly. At Scholartree Manor, he was, unsurprisingly, someone people focused on; even if the Grand Examination was a gathering of experts, logically speaking, with his match coming up, he should capture the attention of many examinees, yet, there was no one paying any attention to him, this made him feel very uncomfortable.

It wasn't that the examinees didn't care for him; a young expert ranked 9th upon the proclamation, he had the qualifications for making people notice him, but his opponent for this round wasn't anyone famous, while the next match was one everyone was focused upon, hence, none of the gazes fell upon him, but instead fell upon two other locations.

The woodlands where Orthodox Academy were standing and the stream bank where the four disciples of Li Mountain were.

The next match was Tang Thirty-Six's turn to enter the stage, Chen Chang Sheng was currently crouched upon the floor, discussing something with him incessantly, his hand held a

branch, drawing and writing on the ground. Luo Luo was also crouching by the side, using her hands to prop up her chin, earnestly listening; Xuan Yuan Po stood before them, using his hulking body to shield them from the stares of the crowd.

Chen Chang Sheng was currently explaining some of the key aspects to Li Shan Sword Arts; this wasn't an act of sharpening your spear at the moment of battle, but was targeted advice towards a specific opponent. He was using the key aspects to Li Shan Sword Arts and relating them to Liang Ban Hu's well-known battles for an analysis, the drawings on the ground, lines made by the tree branch, were all sword manoeuvres.

Liang Ban Hu is the opponent Tang Thirty-Six was about to face.

“Your True Essence capacity and purity is definitely below that of the opponent's.”

Chen Chang Sheng put down the branch and looked at the negligent expression on Tang Thirty-Six's face, seriously saying: “Even if you haven't been as lazy in the Capital as you had been back at Wen Shui, you should be aware of how diligent the disciples of Li Mountain are in their sword training, therefore, there's no contesting the fact that you're inferior to the opponent.”

Tang Thirty-Six threw out his hands, indicating that he didn't think otherwise.

Chen Chang Sheng gave the stream bank a glance, continuing:

“Your levels aren’t too different, without breaking through that barrier, differences at the upper stage of the Meditation Realm shouldn’t have much of an effect in battling, therefore, if you want to win, you can only concentrate upon your moves in order to make a difference.”

Tang Thirty-Six’s expression became serious, asking: “How should I proceed?”

Chen Chang Shen answered: “Seizing attacks; continuously seizing the opportunity to attack.”

Tang Thirty-Six’s eyebrow twitched: “Isn’t that the same tactic you and Xuan Yuan Po used in the first round?”

Chen Chang Sheng said: “It’s not the same, all seizing attacks are nothing more than feints, you have to prepare at least 20 moves in advance as manoeuvres you can chain together, not giving Liang Ban Hu any chance to think. Striving for a mistake in his judgement and once your sword momentum surges, he will definitely believe that you will use the Three Forms of Wen Shui, at this moment, an opportunity will rise.”

Speaking up to this point, he once again picked up the branch and then wrote a few words on the ground.

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“Junior brother and Tang Tang’s levels are fairly close, having practised at Orthodox Academy alongside Chen Chang Shen for such a long time, the level of his sword arts must have improved, it shouldn’t be weaker than yours. But his True Essence capacity and purity will definitely be inferior to yours and his tenacity will also be poorer.

Gou Han Shi extended his hand into the stream and cupped some fresh water, using it to wash his face. He gave a glance towards the woodlands, at the group from Orthodox Academy, then continued talking: “The most impressive thing about Tang Tang is actually his personality, he enjoys taking unconventional paths and is indeed remarkable when he’s determined; if I were Chen Chang Sheng, I would definitely place the only chance of winning on manoeuvres.”

Qi Jian was listening by the side, he couldn’t quite understand and asked: “Senior, if their swords arts are fairly equal, how could you rely upon the moves in order to win?”

“Sword manoeuvres rely upon sequencing, timing, choice and the momentum of your moves,” Gou Han Shi patiently explained.

Hearing those words, Guan Fei Bai thought back to his sword duel against Her Highness, Luo Luo, at the Ivy League gathering, silently nodding.

Liang Ban Hu looked towards the woodlands, his slightly tender looking face was full of calm confidence, he said: “Chen Chang Sheng must be giving him advice at this moment.”

“Correct.”

Gou Han Shi looked at him and said: “Chen Chang Sheng will definitely think of a way to allow Tang Tang to gather momentum through his sword manoeuvring, before finally utilising an unanticipated method to forcefully seek a chance of victory.”

He continued: “As said before, Tang Tang’s most impressive point is his obsessive determination, therefore, I would think that the move he uses after gathering momentum will not be the Three Forms of Wen Shui; that’s because even though those three moves are strong, they’re not decisive enough.”

Liang Ban Hu mused, thinking back to some of the sword scrolls he had seen at Li Mountain’s Sword Hall.

Guan Fei Bai pondered, noticing that if his senior brother’s conjecture was true, there really wouldn’t be any favourable methods for countering; if he were to be the one entering the stage to fight against Tang Tang, then the only thing he could really rely upon was using True Essence for a simple melee.

“Go for a melee,” Gou Han Shi said while looking at Liang Ban Hu.

Liang Ban Hu couldn’t quite understand; Guan Fei Bai was shocked, thinking to himself: “wasn’t this the most stupid method?”

Chapter 147 – Never Would Have Expected

Guan Fei Bai could have never expected that his senior brother would suggest a melee, what good was this type of strategy that even he could think of?

Gou Han Shi didn't pay him any attention, looked at Liang Ban Hu and said: "It doesn't matter whether if he uses real moves or feints; in order for us to eliminate the need to counter all his manoeuvres, you should directly exchange move for move against him."

Guan Fei Bai was learned on the way of the sword and clearly understood that exchanging move for move would only result in exchanging wound for wound.

He thought to himself: "Junior brother Liang is clearly stronger than that Tang Thirty-Six; why would junior brother Liang have to use this kind of method where both sides will suffer?"

Gou Han Shi looked at Liang Ban Hu who had his head down in silence, he knew that his junior brothers were somewhat baffled and thus, calmly explained: "Tang Tang is not as strong as you, as such, Chen Chang Sheng wants to help him with an unconventional means of victory. Since you're stronger than Tang Tang, you cannot choose an irregular path; you should use the simplest or maybe even the stupidest method to win a most ordinary victory."

He stood up and accepted the handkerchief Qi Jian handed him, using it to wipe his face clean.

He looked towards the woodlands, at Tang Thirty-Six, whose

blade-like eyebrows looked like they were about to fly off, and said: “Why do you need a simple melee? That’s because when that fellow is determined, he will take it too far; you will definitely suffer in exchanging move for move, but it should be one of the least damaging methods for achieving victory over him.”

Liang Ban Hu thought for a moment, then said: “I understand, Senior.”

The door to the Tower of Purging Dust slowly opened, the young scholar from Scholartree Manor, Zhong Hui, had easily won against his opponent, walking out of the tower. What made him feel somewhat displeased was that the gazes of the examinees were still focused on those two locations and not himself; the gazes were perhaps even more intense than before, as at this moment, Liang Ban Hu and Tang Thirty-Six had already stood up.

Without further ado, Liang Ban Hu and Tang Thirty-Six did a formal gesture towards the Li Palace clergyman, before entering the tower, one in front and one behind.

Staring at the tightly closed wooden door, the examinees had exceptionally focused expressions upon their faces; the match grounds were quiet.

Over ten matches had already been held in this second round of the duelling phase; apart from the match between the wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu and Su Mo Yu, this match was the one with the strongest participants.

This match was probably even more focused upon than the one between Zhe Xiu and Su Mo Yu, that’s because everyone

understood it wasn't just a contest between Liang Ban Hu and Tang Thirty-Six, but that there were also two other participants.

The other two won't be entering the stage, but their impact wouldn't be any weaker than entering the stage themselves, just as it was for the last night of the Ivy League gathering.

There are some people in the world who can, through their learning and reasoning ability, use guidance to directly change the outcome of a battle, these types of people would be military advisers in the frontlines against the demon race, they would be eminent instructors or elders at most schools. Only Li Shan Sword Sect and Orthodox Academy had two students taking on this role.

Today, at the Grand Examination, the teachers of the various sects and cloisters were not allowed entrance to the examination grounds, a lot of people were incredibly envious of the students from Li Shan Sword Sect and Orthodox Academy.

This was because they had Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng, who could provide guidance at the scene; these two were highly competent, able to solve many problems and change many events where they were present.

Time slowly passed by, the tower remained silent.

Chen Chang Sheng's expression didn't change, but his hands clenched ever tighter and he felt more and more troubled; it was far too quiet.

Suddenly, in the blue skies above, there appeared a swathe of

flame red hue, this colour came from within the Tower of Purging Dust and was the projection of a sword's splendour; it seemed very warm, yet, behind that warmth, there existed a fiery danger.

Crimson clouds enveloped the skies; immensurate beauty.

The Three Forms of Wen Shui, Night Clouds End.

Outside the tower, cries of exclamation erupted, Tang Thirty-Six's sword momentum had actually exceeded the limits of the Education Palace, appearing in the sky above the Tower of Purging Dust and entering everyone's sights.

Gou Han Shi lifted his head and looked at the sunset clouds, remaining silent; he had found that Tang Thirty-Six's improvement at Orthodox Academy was even greater than what people had expected.

Chen Chang Sheng's expression became sombre, that's because, according to the plan set before, today shouldn't have crimson clouds enveloping the sky.

Perhaps, this was Tang Thirty-Six displaying his grit, but what did it represent? At this moment, Liang Ban Hu, who remains silent, had actually forced him to show his relentless determination earlier than planned, this suggested Liang Ban Hu had residual strength to spare and that for some unknown reason, it was Tang Thirty-Six who couldn't make use of the previous ten or more sword moves and transition them into sword momentum.

Sounds of exclamation once again erupted outside of the tower, alongside gasping sounds of admiration.

The crimson cloud covered skies suddenly turned extraordinarily bright, the small stream became gleaming, its small bank akin to having sprung countless red maples.

The sunset was quickly followed by: A Flow of Maples.

Tang Thirty-Six's sword manifestation had actually dispersed this far, able to affect the area outside of the tower; as a young man that had yet to achieve Ethereal Opening, it was something worthy of being proud.

Yet, Chen Chang Sheng's expression became ever more stern.

This was because, up to this moment, he had yet to see Liang Ban Hu's sword; no one present at the match grounds had seen any sign of it.

Suddenly, the sunset clouds receded, the maples disappeared and an extremely mild and soft, exceedingly gentle sword manifestation, swept across the sky above the Tower of Purging Dust.

This sword manifestation was akin to water; clear water. Countless amounts of limpid lake water washed across the sky.

Whether sunset clouds, the sunset or red maples, they were all

washed away, reminding everyone that the previous hues were not real, but something etched out by someone grasping the sword as a brush; since it was etched out, using a dye, as long as it was dye, it can be washed away by water, as long as there was enough water, enough purity.

Half a lake of clear water, sufficient to cleanse all stains and evil, enough to thoroughly cleanse this patch of heaven, revealing its original deep blue hue.

Outside of the tower, countless examinees lifted their heads to look at the sky, none of them made sounds of exclamation, but were instead silent.

Whether be it the sunset glow or the heaven cleansing lake water, both were the sword manifestations of those two youths, reflecting within this miniature world.

They really were extremely strong.

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent for a while, becoming calm once again, he looked at Gou Han Shi, who was by the faraway stream bank, and inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Gou Han Shi returned the gesture with a nod.

The door to the Tower of Purging Dust opened, Liang Ban Hu walked out, behind him by a single step was Tang Thirty-Six.

It was probably only the difference of a single step.

Both of them had wounds upon their body; the mark of swords evident upon their clothing.

The examiner gave them both a praiseful eye and said: “Li Shan Sword Sect, Liang Ban Hu wins.”

Liang Ban Hu faced Tang Thirty-Six and brought his hands together, his left fingers covering his right, with his palms facing himself; he formally gestured (揖行礼) towards Tang Thirty-Six and then they walked down the stone steps, they respectively headed towards the woodlands and the stream bank.

Tang Thirty-Six was exhausted, maybe due to this, he didn't want to say anything.

Returning to the woodlands, he sat upon the ground, leaning on a white poplar, his eyes closed.

When Chen Chang Sheng gave him medicine, he only opened his mouth, continuing to refuse to open his eyes.

Xuan Yuan Po walked over to his side, crouching down to look at him; his light stubble filled, yet young looking face was evidently full of worry, he said: “Say something will you.”

Tang Thirty-Six had his eyes shut, choosing to ignore him.

Xuan Yuan Po felt slightly anxious, looked towards Chen Chang Sheng and said: “Is he alright?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “He might have been injured a bit heavily by Liang Ban Hu and needs to rest, we shouldn’t disturb him.”

A lot of things in the world are as such, especially for males at the juvenile stage of their lives; when others are concerned for you, you will resist this concern, not wanting to give them any attention, but once those people prepare to leave, you will quickly come to feel lonely, uncomfortable.

Tang Thirty-Six opened his eyes, looked at Chen Chang Sheng and angrily said: “What do you mean ‘injured a bit heavily’? Where am I injured?”

Luo Luo pointed at the parts of his uniform that had been rent open by a sword and then pointed at the faint lines of blood upon his face.

“You call this heavy? You should see that Liang Ban Hu; his leg was almost cut off by me.”

Tang Thirty-Six felt ashamed, yet annoyed and said: “I was only feeling slightly tired, I only want to lay here by the tree for a while, so can all of you just stop bothering me.”

After finishing those words, he once again closed his eyes.

Chen Chang Sheng knew that this fellow had always had a strong sense of pride, losing in the second round of the Grand Examination must be excruciatingly hard for him to accept.

He couldn't let this person wallow in such a state, he had always been of the opinion that this was a form of wasting your life and was completely meaningless.

All negative emotions should be immediately conquered or perhaps better described as discarded.

“Are you lacking in money?” he looked at Tang Thirty-Six and asked.

Tang Thirty-Six kept his eyes closed and snorted, answering: “Have you seen anyone wealthier than I?”

Chen Chang Sheng once again asked a question: “Your results in the Academic Exam should be fine? Will your total marks be enough to enter the Third Grade?”

Tang Thirty-Six opened his eyes to look at him and asked: “There shouldn't be any problem in entering the Third Grade, the question is, why are you asking this?”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at him and seriously said: “Being able to enter the Third Grade will mean being able to enter the

Mausoleum of Books; you're not lacking in money and the girls from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green adore you; what else do you want?"

Tang Thirty-Six felt that there seemed to be something else behind that question and seriously began to contemplate on it for some time. He then enquired uncertainly: "First upon the First Banner?"

Chen Chang Sheng coarsely replied: "That's mine."

Tang Thirty-Six laughed as he rebuked him: "You're too shameless."

At this moment he was finally certain, Chen Chang Sheng wasn't preparing to give him a lecture on life itself, but only wanted to console him, this was indeed effective, at the very least, he no longer wanted to close his eyes and pretend to be asleep.

"Tell us," said Luo Luo by the side.

Tang Thirty-Six remained silent for a long while and then said: "I never would have expected that Liang Ban Hu would fight so stupidly."

Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po didn't understand his words, but Chen Chang Sheng did.

Liang Ban Hu's ability is above that of Tang Thirty-Six's. Chen

Chang Sheng and Tang Thirty-Six could only rely upon unconventional means, in an attempt to use a method their opponent would never think of and bringing a surprise upon the Grand Examination.

But they could have never guessed that Liang Ban Hu would use one of the simplest methods to counter, unexpected? No, he hadn't thought of anything at all.

“I've never seen such an unsightly and stupid method of fighting.”

Tang Thirty-Six remained silent for a moment before continuing: “He didn't even consider how to counter the sword manoeuvres you chose for me, he only concentrated upon attacking, stupid beyond compare, without any finesse at all... but I can't deny that it was effective.”

He continued, “tens of moves were used, yet they couldn't come together at all. The constant interruptions made me very uncomfortable; I didn't even have the chance to use those three weird moves you thought of, I could only try and use the Three Forms of Wen Shui.”

“He endured through it all, therefore I lost.”

Something Chen Chang Sheng can think of was something anyone participating in the Grand Examination can think of; Liang Ban Hu's battle strategy definitely had substantial amounts of Gou Han Shi's wisdom within.

If it could be said that Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi were equals at the Ivy League gathering, then today it can be said that in the match between Tang Thirty-Six and Liang Ban Hu, he had completely lost.

He said to Tang Thirty-Six: "I'm sorry."

Tang Thirty-Six remained quiet for a while, then said: "This isn't your fault, you don't have to apologise, if I was as strong as Liang Ban Hu, it would be Gou Han Shi having a headache instead and you could have had an easier time countering him. In the end, it's my own ability being lacking that caused this. I'm the one who's given you a headache, I'm the one that should be apologising."

Xuan Yuan Po honestly said from the side: "I don't understand the things the two of you are saying."

"Then I'll say something you can understand."

Tang Thirty-Six laughed, he then looked at Chen Chang Sheng calmly and said: "We've already lost two matches, we can't lose any more."

While they were conversing, the matches continued; two had already finished.

Chen Chang Sheng's match was pending.

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a while and said: "I can win this

match.”

Finishing those words, he stood up and headed towards the Tower of Purging Dust.

Chapter 148 – Cliff Edge

The second round of the Duelling Stage had already entered its second half, in the two most eye-catching matches between Li Shan Sword Sect and Orthodox Academy, one resulted in conceding defeat and the other, a loss. It could be said that Li Shan Sword Sect had regained the dignity they lost at the Ivy League gathering, while Orthodox Academy was pushed to the edge of a cliff.

Though it had to be said that the duels are not team battles and that, in the end, the Grand Examination will only rank people based upon their individual results, the young examinees were, in the end, not something that had just bounded out of some boulder crags; whether be it in the eyes of the masses or acknowledged by themselves, their results would also represent the glory of their respective academies and sects.

The third person of Orthodox Academy to enter the stage is Chen Chang Sheng.

Luo Luo was the one recognised as to being the strongest in Orthodox Academy; since she was matched up against Tian Hai Sheng Xue, who had already completed his Ethereal Opening, the majority of people considered her chances of winning to be impossible, therefore, if the academy didn't wish to see a total defeat in the second round, it was up to Chen Chang Sheng as to if he could pass this obstacle.

Even though he had won against that Heavenly Academy student in the first round, no one thought well of his chances, everyone knew that he was the weakest of the four Orthodox Academy students; even Tang Thirty-Six had lost, how was he going to avoid

failing? A miracle? If such a thing was to happen frequently, it wouldn't be a miracle, but something questionable.

The second reason why no one was optimistic for Chen Chang Sheng was because the lot drawing for the second round today, was questionable.

They all knew that someone must have manipulated the lot drawing.

Chen Chang Sheng's opponent for this round was the scholar from Scholartree Manor named Huo Guang.

No matter from what perspective this was viewed at, this was the perfect choice, it wasn't the best choice for Chen Chang Sheng, but it was the best choice for those who wanted him to fail.

From the Divine Empress to peddler and pawns; from the White Emperor Royal Couple situated in the faraway yao domain to the Capital's storytellers. Everyone upon the central continent were paying attention to the Grand Examination that was being held in the Capital; following the announcement of his betrothal to Xu You Rong at the Ivy League gathering and the declaration of his intent to place first upon the First Banner by His Eminence, The Archbishop, countless eyes were focused upon Chen Chang Sheng.

Under these circumstances, those who wished to suppress Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng had to be extra careful in their deeds, at least to the point of not being uncovered upon a single glance.

If Chen Chang Sheng had been immediately matched against Gou Han Shi in the second round, anyone would have recognised that something was dubious, not mentioning whether if the Education Board might flip the table, the castanets on the tables of those storytellers within the Capital would definitely clack more often.

Huo Guang of Scholartree Manor was the perfect choice.

This young scholar had always stayed within Scholartree Manor, peacefully studying and had never left to train, hence, he was still unranked on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, for those who didn't know any better, he would seem to be exceedingly weak.

The truth however, was that Scholartree Manor had no weaklings, not to mention, Huo Guang was an individual the manor was concentrating on nurturing, preparing to enter the Grand Examination and shock the world, how could Chen Chang Sheng possibly be his match?

The atmosphere of the woodlands was rather dreary.

Tang Thirty-Six leaned on the white poplar, looking at Chen Chang Sheng's back, he suddenly said: "If you can't win then just withdraw, don't let anything happen to you."

He had previously said to Chen Chang Sheng that they can't afford to lose again, this was because he knew that Chen Chang Sheng had some sort of reason why he had to place first upon the First banner in the Grand Examination, as such, he obviously couldn't afford to lose.

Having suddenly thought of how, even if Chen Chang Sheng was to once again achieve a baffling victory and defeat that scholar from Scholartree Manor, in the end, he would still be unable to win against opponents such as Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Gou Han Shi, making Tang Thirty-Six want to take back the words he had said previously.

From his perspective, Chen Chang Sheng was still very young and had a lot of years remaining, with his talent and learning, who knows how far he could progress in the future? If he was to strive his utmost and yet still fail to place first, why should he strive so hard? Why not set his sights on the time to come, leaving it for the future, why be so cruel to himself?

Chen Chang Sheng waved his hand, but didn't turn his head, this was because he didn't have a way to explain himself; even though he was still young, he didn't have many years left to squander.

He did a formal gesture towards the Li Palace clergyman and walked to the top of the stone steps.

In the first match, his right boot had been destroyed, at this time, he had a pair of new boots on.

These boots were brought over by Lady Official Li from her chambers, they were new, but very comfortable. The size was just right; Luo Luo had probably recorded his measurements privately.

Wearing these boots, he felt rather well-grounded, full of confidence.

By the woodlands, Xuan Yuan Po said to Tang Thirty-Six: “Do you need to rest for a while?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at Chen Chang Sheng, who was standing faraway, upon the stone steps. He remained quiet for a moment, then said: “No need, give me the crystal.”

As stated in Elder Tian Ji’s evaluation at the time of the proclamation’s update, he had been influenced by Chen Chang Sheng quite strongly; such as, at this moment and time, seeing the figure of Chen Chang Sheng, he quickly removed himself from the misery he was previously mired in; preparing to meditate and recover his True Essence.

Since there was the possibility of a second tournament, he had to at least make it into the Third Grade, otherwise, he really would start to feel diminished in front of Chen Chang Sheng.

This wasn’t a matter of achievement in realms, but a matter of will.

The tower door opened, Chen Chang Sheng and that scholar named Huo Guang walked in.

They were separated by a distance of tens of metres; standing upon the sand covered floor, they quietly faced each other.

If one were to carefully observe, they would perhaps be able to see the faint existence of blood stains below the yellow sand near their feet, these were probably left behind by the examinees in the

previous duel.

“I’ve heard about you,” Huo Guang broke the silence, staring at him and continued, “from before arriving at the Capital.”

That scholar from Scholartree Manor looked to be around 18, 19 years of age, his expression was cold; he and his other fellow students looked as if they had been carved out from a single mould; in truth, their features were not similar at all, the only reason why they gave this feeling was because the young scholars from Scholartree Manor gave off a hard to describe type of aura.

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t answer; he didn’t feel the need to.

“I knew that I would run into you at the Grand Examination,” Huo Guang looked at him calmly and continued, “from before arriving at the Capital.”

It was at this moment that Chen Chang Sheng finally knew, the suppression applied upon Orthodox Academy today at the Grand Examination, wasn’t just interference from the Zhou Dynasty, or more specifically, from within the Orthodoxy, it even involved the far off Southern Domain.

Yet, he continued to remain silent, calmly adjusting his breathing and True Essence flow.

“In order to resist the demon race’s invasion, the human world needs to be united, an overflowing momentum, unstoppable by all;

anyone seeking to prevent this, would only be flushed into the fetid gutter of history itself. As for you... you have already affected the progress towards an alliance between the North and South, therefore, you cannot take first place upon the First Banner, more importantly, neither can you marry Xu You Rong.”

Huo Guang looked at him while talking, with an expressionless face.

Chen Chang Sheng finally understood what that hard to describe aura was.

Like at the last night of the Ivy League gathering, the words from that rural scholar gave him the same kind of feeling.

In this world, there has always been a certain number of people, a certain number of scholars, that believed in some very strange logic.

For Heaven and Earth, a pledge of the heart; for life itself, a pledge of life; for past sages, the continuation of secret teachings; for all ages, the forging of peace; therefore, will you kindly go and die.

Iron shoulders, burdened with justice; after your death, I'll look after your family; this entire world will also be cared for by me.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head; if there was only the first half, it would be very worthy of respect; if the latter half was to be

included, then it becomes bad.

He didn't like that type of aura.

He disliked it even more than the bloodthirsty aura that Xu Shi Ji gave off.

“Don't worry, I won't use words to insult you, because that's meaningless and very dull,” said Huo Guang, while looking at him indifferently, yet, the faintest hint of movement could be seen in his brows for an instant.

Perhaps at this moment, he remembered the mean and callous words Tang Thirty-Six had said to him when they were arguing over the path back in the forest during the Martial Trial.

“I will simply just defeat you.”

He looked at Chen Chang Sheng, looking down upon him from some lofty, idealistic position and said: “Draw your blade and meet your failure.”

Chen Chang Sheng continued to remain silent, not answering, neither did he unsheathe his sword.

This made the actions of Huo Guang look rather absurd; akin to drawing your sword against a wall; akin to intoning a long, lyrical poem to the starry sky.

Motionless yellow sand covered the ground.

Huo Guang's expression became a little frosty, he looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said: "If you don't draw your sword, then you won't get another chance to draw it today."

Following these words, a distinct and powerful aura began emanating from his body.

Chen Chang Sheng calmly looked at him, slowly raising his right hand, it was very close to the hilt of the short sword at his waist; within grasping distance if he were to reach out.

In the end, he didn't grasp onto the sword's hilt.

He withdrew his right hand, he clenched his five fingers together, forming a fist.

"Very well."

Huo Guang looked at his actions, feeling deeply insulted, his brows slowly rose upwards; he took a deep breath.

An extremely pure True Essence began emanating outwards, passing through his ochre coloured scholar's robe and raising a wind within the Tower of Purging Dust.

That wind revolved around Huo Guang's body, akin to a screen.

He carried a large sword upon his back, yet he didn't draw it; as Chen Chang Sheng had done, he clenched his fist and then sent out a single punch.

A ringing sound exploded out.

A cavity instantly appeared within the wind screen that surrounded him; a fist, suffused with a light green radiance and condensed from True Essence, violently exploded outward from within that cavity, taking but an instant to cross tens of metres, arriving before Chen Chang Sheng. What was more shocking however, was that additional fist manifestations coalesced, one after another from within that wind screen, successively striking towards Chen Chang Sheng.

Dozens of fist manifestations, formed from True Essence, akin to genuine fists, poured in from all directions, like the wind and the rain.

The massive mirror within the Hall of Zhao Wen, that was tens of metres in circumference, displayed the battle within the Tower of Purging Dust, it clearly transmitted the scene to the sights of the important figures present.

Starting from Chen Chang Sheng and Huo Guang's entrance into the tower, the hall had become abnormally quiet.

His Eminence didn't continue sleeping, but was serenely observing the display of Chen Chang Sheng, it couldn't be seen from his expression as to whether if he still had the same confidence from before.

Dozens of green rays suddenly appeared upon the mirror.

Though they weren't at the scene itself and were only seeing a display, it seemed as if they could also feel the power contained within.

Xue Xing Chuan's body leaned forwards slightly, he said in an astonished voice: "Regiment Shattering Fist?"

For the important figures present within the Hall of Zhao Wen, that scholar named Huo Guang was only at the Meditation Realm. The methods he could use would not be able to shock them, but thinking of Huo Guang's age, for him to be able to develop the most difficult to train Regiment Shattering Fist to this level, this was still somewhat surprising.

The one that was about to confront those dozens of Regiment Shattering Fists, was Chen Chang Sheng.

Within the minds of many present in the hall, they silently began to declare his elimination from the contest.

The Archbishop's eyes squinted slightly, his cloudy gaze once again became sharp.

Mo Yu had a look of indifference on her face, yet, the nails on her hand that was laying on the armrest of her chair were slightly pale.

Prince Chen Liu gave her a glance, feelings of doubt abounded.

Chapter 149 – Heading Forwards Ungainly

The fist manifestations crossed the air, maintaining its form. Until it comes into contact with the opponent or some other kind of obstacle it won't release its energy.

It can completely maintain its initial power, having an incredibly fearsome ability in breaching defences.

Even cultivators with a perfect Purification would not be able to use their body to directly block it, they need to think of some way to dodge or make use of an even greater True Essence to forcibly overpower it.

This fist technique had another characteristic: its punch was like the wind, while its wind condensed to a punch; ending as it had started; moving like a gale and storm; enclosing all positions; a single fist was able to defeat tens of people or more, making it most suited for use on the battlefield. It was rumoured that once trained to its peak, a single punch can even defeat a thousand soldiers, hence, it was called Regiment Shattering Fist.

In the first match, Chen Chang Sheng displayed an unbelievable speed, but Regiment Shattering Fist didn't give him any room to display his speed, additionally, anyone could tell that his True Essence capacity was very ordinary; in comparison to the geniuses that were participating in the Grand Examination, it was even more pitiful, if he didn't have any other methods, then he would definitely lose.

Inside the Hall of Zhao Wen, it was very quiet. Everyone was observing the scene on the mirror, looking at the dozens of fists infused with a green glow that were exploding towards Chen Chang Sheng from all directions with differing expressions upon

their faces.

Beside His Eminence, The Archbishop of the Education Board, Mei Li Sha, two additional chairs had been set, upon them sat two Bishops that clearly looked rather young, yet, from their clothing, it could be seen that they were actually personages of the same status as Mei Li Sha, it was unknown as to which Holy Churches they were in charge of.

These two Archbishops of the Holy Church had come to the Hall of Zhao Wen rather belatedly for some unknown reason, giving people the feeling that they had come to watch this specific match.

Expressions varied amongst those within the hall, yet the two Archbishops were very peaceful, calm and composed.

This was because they were well aware of that scholar from Scholartree Manor, Huo Guang's cultivation level; more accurately, Huo Guang was the opponent they intentionally chose for Chen Chang Sheng.

The drawing of lots in the Grand Examination was something they had secretly prepared.

Chen Chang Sheng's display of power and all other details in his first match had already been secretly leaked out to Scholartree Manor through clergy members under their command. This was the reason why Huo Guang had immediately used something like the Regiment Shattering Fist, which expends a large amount True Essence, the aim was to ensure Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any chance of winning.

Everything was in order to guarantee a single thing, that Chen Chang Sheng will definitely lose.

Mo Yu looked at Chen Chang Sheng who had already been pushed to the edge of the precipice, her fine brows wrinkled, the two hands that were grasping onto the armrests on her chair tightened further.

Prince Chen Liu was by the side, observing her out of the corner of his eye, the perplexion he felt became ever deeper. He couldn't understand, as a representative figure of the faction wanting to repress Orthodox Academy, seeing Chen Chang Sheng on the verge of failure, why was she feeling so nervous and paying so much attention to the match's current situation? Could it be that she would worry about Chen Chang Sheng? This didn't make any sense.

At the next moment, he suddenly thought of something and believed that he had deduced Mo Yu's rationale.

At the Ivy League gathering, Her Highness, Luo Luo, had utilised a simplified version of Discerning Steps in her duel against Guang Fei Bai, it was identified by Gou Han Shi and dumbfounded the entire gathering.

The reason why Chen Chang Sheng knew the demon race's absolute secret art, Discerning Steps was still an unsolved enigma; even though the steps used by Her Highness at the gathering wasn't a completed Discerning Steps, at the level of something like the Ivy League gathering and the Grand Examination, that type of simplified or perhaps better described as malformed Discerning

Steps, was already adequate to exhibit a very strong effect; for example, when facing the approach of a storm-like Regiment Shattering Fist...

Mo Yu had probably thought of the scene from the Ivy League gathering; she wasn't worried about Chen Chang Sheng failing and getting hurt, but was nervous about whether Chen Chang Sheng will utilise that simplified version of Discerning Steps, directly escaping the area enshrouded by the Regiment Shattering Fist, bringing an unanticipated change to the match. This is what Prince Chen Liu conjectured.

If he could think of Chen Chang Sheng's simplified Discerning Steps, then the other people within the Hall of Zhao Wen could obviously also think of it; Xu Shi Ji's expression was a little stern, Xue Xing Chuan was once again firmly seated, the hall became somewhat quiet, everyone clearly understood that Chen Chang Sheng would not, at the very least, immediately lose and that this match should continue for a while longer.

The two Archbishops of the Holy Church continued to have expressionless faces, as representative figures of the new faction within the Orthodoxy, they had a little more knowledge of events than others. Since they wanted to suppress Orthodox Academy; since they wanted to borrow someone from Scholartree Manor to eliminate Chen Chang Sheng in the second round, how could they possible miss these reports?

All the methods available to Chen Chang Sheng were already made known to his opponent.

Perhaps, Huo Guang was currently waiting for Chen Chang Sheng to use that simplified version of Discerning Steps, escaping from the storm shower that had been formed by the Regiment Shattering Fist.

Huo Guang was definitely concealing an even stronger move, awaiting the very instant he escapes.

At the next moment, a light sound of astonishment resonated within the Hall of Zhao Wen.

The two Holy Church Archbishops lightly frowned, seeing the scene within the mirror, they felt rather startled and confused.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't utilise the simplified Discerning Steps, he didn't seek to break out of the Regiment Shattering Fists that had surrounded him.

More specifically, he didn't do anything at all; both his feet were planted upon the sand strewn ground, firmly, as if they had been nailed in place, without a single movement.

He stood in place, staring across those dozens of green fist manifestations, coalesced from True Essence and looked at Huo Guang, remaining quiet without saying anything.

Time marched forwards rapidly; he didn't have to wait long; the important figures within the Hall of Zhao Wen and the Li Palace clergy that were quietly observing the match didn't have to watch

long; the Regiment Shattering Fist, carrying fearsome power, finally arrived before him, akin to a real storm, flooding every angle of the area around his body.

For the many people who saw this scene, whether be it Xu Shi Ji, Mo Yu, or perhaps the clergy upon the second floor that leaned towards Orthodox Academy, they all couldn't understand; they didn't know what he wanted to do.

This is a duel within the Grand Examination, there wasn't the danger of death, logically speaking, there shouldn't be a situation where someone will just give up and wait for their defeat, not to mention, even if he was to admit to being unable to defeat his opponent, why would he stand in place and suffer the storm-like attack of the Regiment Shattering Fist?

Confusion and doubt, this was what most of those observing were currently feeling, some even felt rather disappointed, such as Prince Chen Liu and Mo Yu.

At this stage, Chen Chang Sheng had lost for certain.

Huo Guang's Regiment Shattering Fist maintained its power, forming a light green perimeter of wind and rain that was around 7 metres in circumference, which surrounded Chen Chang Sheng, inside, there was countless wind and rain, all of which were horrifying fist manifestations.

Even if Chen Chang Sheng was now to utilise that simplified Discerning Steps, he wouldn't be able to break out of that perimeter of wind and rain formed by the Regiment Shattering Fist.

Not unless he could utilise the real, complete version of Discerning Steps.

But that was impossible.

Arriving at the Capital in Spring, becoming the first student of Orthodox Academy in over a decade, bringing about countless commotion, wanting to become the first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination; all of this was going to end at this very moment?

In the next instant, Chen Chang Sheng moved.

When everyone thought that he would move, he stood in place and didn't move at all.

When everyone thought that he couldn't possible move, he suddenly moved.

He didn't use Discerning Steps, but instead, directly charged into the storm ahead that was formed by the Regiment Shattering Fist.

His movement seemed stiff at first glance, feeling a bit ungainly, but was very steady.

The tower's second floor erupted in quiet cries, some of the observing clergy were very startled, some were very worried.

At this moment, in the air surrounding him, there were at least dozens of fist manifestations, whirling around like a hurricane, at the fore of each fist manifestation there was a fist, infused with a green glow.

Those fists were not real existences; they could be said to be fake.

But each of them harboured a fearsome power that was real as can be.

The wind and rain formed by the Regiment Shattering Fist was very dense, as if not a single gap existed between them; apart from a complete Discerning Steps, borrowing a natural momentum to traverse it, other footwork skills or motion techniques, no matter how transcendent, would come into contact with those fists and trigger the fearsome power that was stored within, not to mention, he hadn't used any sort of footwork skill, only simply charging forwards.

A popping sound was emitted as the new boot upon his right foot disintegrated, akin to snowflakes.

The sand suddenly scattered, revealing the stone floor beneath, web-like fissures once again appeared.

His body's clash with the air brought forth a mournful howl, his body became a blur; the Black Dragon once again appeared.

After an extremely short amount of time, the blur slightly stalled.

This was because a strong fist manifestation struck his right shoulder.

His dark coloured uniform burst open like a flower, whistling sounds could be heard; cloth scraps scattered to the wind; the fist manifestation passed into his body; the skin instantly reddened, as if it was on the verge of rupturing apart.

At this moment, he had only advanced two steps.

It seems it was going to stop here; he would be smashed into the floor by the storm-like Regiment Shattering Fist.

The second floor suddenly turned quiet.

The light sound of a laugh erupted within the Hall of Zhao Wen, carrying with it the hint of scorn.

Mo Yu didn't laugh, she looked at the scene displayed upon the mirror with mixed feelings.

It seemed as if she could see, at the next moment, Chen Chang Sheng's right shoulder, skin sundered, flesh rent, bones broken, blood flowing, followed by further strikes of Regiment Shattering Fist; then, vomiting blood and collapsing; failing as such and being eliminated from the examination.

She could even see, further off in the future, his desolate back as that youth left Orthodox Academy.

That room within the small dorm, the bedding now cold, no matter how much soothing incense was used, it would no longer contain the scent it once had.

She remembered the words Her Divine Majesty had said to her, suddenly feeling rather remorseful, rather dejected.

A lot of people were thinking in the way Mo Yu was.

That's right, Chen Chang Sheng had displayed a frightening defence in his first round match.

Yet, Regiment Shattering Fist is Regiment Shattering Fist, even a perfect Purification would not be able to directly block it.

Prince Chen Liu remained quiet without saying anything, rather angry at why hadn't Chen Chang Sheng drawn his sword at the start of the match.

Xu Shi Ji continued to remain expressionless, his status was currently a bit awkward, seeing Chen Chang Sheng's defeat, it would be improper for him to display any sort of reaction.

Everyone thought that Chen Chang Sheng would be badly

injured by the Regiment Shattering Fist.

Yet, at the next moment, a miraculous image appeared from within the Tower of Purging Dust.

The Regiment Shattering Fist fell upon Chen Chang Sheng's right shoulder, his uniform instantly split and blood vaguely appeared.

Yet, it was only a momentary hint, quickly returning to normal.

A faint popping sound could be heard resounding from his shoulder.

That blow from the Regiment Shattering Fist... dissipated like smoke, wisping away with the wind.

Such a horrifying punch couldn't even make him bleed.

How was this something that would split the air like a falling cliff; something that could split the earth and terrify forest birds?

This was a breeze brushing across a hill.

That blow from the Regiment Shattering Fist was naught but a tickle for Chen Chang Sheng.

Huo Guang's expression immediately changed.

Cries of exclamation were emitted from the second floor continuously.

The Hall of Zhao Wen was dead silent.

At this moment, Chen Chang Sheng's left foot landed upon the ground.

He continued forwards, sweeping towards Huo Guang who was opposite.

His movements looked so ungainly.

Yet... so terrifying.

Chapter 150 – Blood Soaked; Sword Drawing; Unfettered Cloud; Falling Beard

A breeze touching upon cliff stone, will naturally dissipate.

This was the feeling conveyed to others from the blow that struck upon Chen Chang Sheng's shoulder.

Of course, it couldn't have possibly been an actual breeze, and thus, his uniform ripped and dispersed, his body, that continued to leave behind afterimages, was stalled for but an instant.

It was only an instant.

His left foot landed upon the ground, the brand new boot predictably disintegrated into smithereens, and once again, cracks appeared upon the hard floor.

At almost the same time, several blows, hard to gauge the order at which they arrived, struck upon his body one after the other. His uniform was heavily damaged, fragments danced in the air, while on his body, there appeared several distinct imprints from punches that hadn't penetrated too deeply.

From the image seen, it didn't even seem like as if it were the blows striking upon him, but rather, it looked like as if he was intentionally charging into those powerful fist manifestations.

A whistling sound once again rose, Chen Chang Sheng turned into a blur and accompanied a horrifyingly ear piercing sound of clashing; the wind and rain that had been formed by tens of fists was forcibly smashed apart, disappearing without a trace.

Only a single disintegrated boot remained upon the fractured floor, akin to some flower blossoming from stone; fragments of his uniform slowly drifted down, akin to cotton floating downwards in the air.

The Hall of Zhao Wen could no longer maintain its calm and erupted to the sound of sliding chairs.

Mo Yu stood up, staring at the scene within the mirror, her striking eyes were filled with shock.

The principal of Star Seizer Academy was stunned speechless while the Bishop of Temple Seminary, that was next to him, couldn't control their emotions and let out a cry of surprise.

Xu Shi Ji continued to remain expressionless, akin to stone, it couldn't be seen as to what he was thinking.

The two Archbishops that had just arrived to the hall had a slight change to their expressions.

Xue Xing Chuan's body once again leaned forwards, he stared at the mirror intently, his expression becoming unusually stern.

Even a Purification that was greater than perfection would not allow the cultivator's body to reach this type of strength, even for the demon race it wouldn't be able to.

Why was Chen Chang Sheng's defence this incredibly frightening? No matter what type of extraordinary encounter he was to have, even if he was to refine all the rare herbs within the Hundred Herb Garden into pills and then consume them, it would not be enough to achieve this.

The personages within the hall were all knowledgeable people, while the two Archbishops were the same as Mei Li Sha, one of the six figureheads of the Orthodoxy, yet, they had never seen this type of thing before.

Chen Chang Sheng's body was indeed strong beyond belief; it was completely beyond understanding.

This was why they were shocked.

Chen Chang Sheng's defence was, of course, not absolute, it was unlikely to be able to defend against tools or attacks from sharp weaponry, but this type of basic ability was indeed a little dumbfounding.

Xue Xing Chuan had thought a little further, therefore his expression was sterner.

This was because he thought of a name that hadn't been heard of

for a long time.

Zhou Du Fu.

For the past thousand years, acknowledged upon the continent as to being the strongest.

Whether be it the Demon Lord that had sworn they would rule the entire continent, or His Royal Majesty, Emperor Taizong, who had dazzled akin to the Sun's radiance; in terms of individual battle strength, they couldn't compare to that person.

Even if one were to examine the period from whence the Heavenly Tomes descended, Zhou Du Fu would rank at least amongst the top three.

Many years ago, when Zhou Du Fu was still a youth, he was far from having a peerless strength, but at the time, he was already very famous upon the continent, for he possessed a defence that surpassed that of a perfect Purification.

Everyone knew that this was due to some extremely fortuitous circumstances, whereby which he had bathed in dragon's blood when he was but a babe.

Yet, the continent had been peaceful for many years and the Dragon Tribe had already disappeared, for hundreds of years there had been no sighting of dragons, where would Chen Chang Sheng go to obtain a dragon's essence blood?

Xue Xing Chuan didn't ponder further, as that line of thinking was even more inexplicable than the body strength Chen Chang Sheng had displayed, the scene upon the mirror was also, once again, capturing his full attention – seeing Chen Chang Sheng rush towards Huo Guang like a blur he understood why Chen Chang Sheng hadn't moved from the very start.

An even stronger defence would still be unable to withstand Regiment Shattering Fist's endless impacts, even if he was able to endure it, he would definitely be injured, perhaps severely. Like this, even if he was to defeat Huo Guang, he would be unable to continue achieving victory in the difficult battles to come.

Therefore, Chen Chang Sheng waited, he waited for his opponent to complete forming their Regiment Shattering Fist, waited for that storm which covered the entire floor of the tower to condense until it only covered the area metres away from him. The fully formed Regiment Shattering Fist would be even fiercer in its power, but he only needed to break through a single layer in order to escape it in its entirety. He needed to endure a number punches within a short period of time, in order to endeavour for time, so that he may reduce the overall number of punches he would receive in the match.

Xue Xing Chuan's expression once again changed, thinking to himself that this was an extremely confident way of fighting.

Chen Chang Sheng was a figure of focus in the Grand Examination; including the two Archbishops of the Holy Church and many other important personages, they all focused upon him

intently.

A lot of people, such as Mo Yu, for example, had thought that they had a grasp on all the methods or cards he could use, but in truth, no one knew what he possessed, this included His Eminence and even Luo Luo.

The scholar from Scholartree Manor, Huo Guang's Regiment Shattering Fist was indeed fearsome and the timing of its usage was perfect.

If he was as everyone had remembered, even if it was to be the most optimistic estimation of his strength, facing against this type of strong and prepared opponent, the only assumption would be certain failure. Yet, no one could have guessed that his current strength, that the extraordinary encounter he had was even more absurd than the most fantastical of thoughts.

Even he himself, still wasn't sure as to what he had experienced, he didn't know that he had bathed in dragon's blood, only being able to surmise a few things from his body's transformation, but he did know that he was very strong.

His current self, had at least four ways to break out of the storm-like Regiment Shattering Fist.

He chose what seemed to be one of the most direct, yet most stupid methods.

Because no one would think of this method.

As with Tang Thirty-Six's match against Liang Ban Hu, he couldn't have possibly guessed that Gou Han Shi would have Liang Ban Hu fight so stupidly, nor could Tang Thirty-Six have ever expected that Liang Ban Hu would actually fight as such.

He could have used Discerning Steps to avoid his opponent's Regiment Shattering Fist, that's right, even if it had already been fully formed he would still be able to dodge it; even though the Discerning Steps he had mastered couldn't be said to be complete, it wasn't the one everyone had seen Luo Luo use at the Ivy League gathering; it was more complex and brilliant than what everyone was thinking of.

But he didn't use it.

He also had the option of drawing the short sword at his waist, using the First Movement of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, Rising Flurry, to directly fight against the fist manifestations that blanketed the area.

But he didn't.

This was because they were only in the second round of the Duelling Stage, he had yet to go against those opponents that were actually strong, he couldn't reveal his strongest methods and cards.

The scholar opposite, named Huo Guang, wasn't worthy of making him use those methods.

In the blink of an eye, the Regiment Shattering Fist was broken through, the tides had turned.

Chen Chang Sheng became a blur, instantly arriving before Huo Guang.

Huo Guang was shocked, but his level was far above that disciple from Huang Shan Valley, not to mention, Scholartree Manor's disciples were most focused on cultivating the heart and mind; suddenly coming across this type of development, he wasn't even flustered, sending out a single punch.

He didn't draw his sword, as Chen Chang Sheng had arrived too quickly, this punch was a continuation to the Regiment Breaking Fist, chaining manoeuvres was natural, thus, it was also the fastest move he could do.

This punch of his did not strike towards Chen Chang Sheng, but struck upon the ground, its fist manifestation was extremely brilliant.

Only a ringing sound could be heard resounding, the sand before his feet danced into the air, the fist manifestation quietly enshrouded within.

Borrowing the fist manifestation's recoil, he quickly bounded backwards, his ochre coloured robe even left behind several trailing afterimages of his sleeves, it could be imagined as to how quickly he had retreated, how resolute.

At the same time as he bounded backwards, his right hand reached behind his shoulder, preparing to draw his sword.

He had been carrying a sword all this time.

The sword was very large and its form a little strange, its centre was actually curved.

The sword was called Righteous Thought and is one of the seven swords that could be conveyed to disciples of Scholartree Manor; it was extremely sharp, containing a profundity within, though it couldn't be listed upon the Banner of Divine Armaments, it was no ordinary item.

He firmly believed that all he needed was this sword in hand and no matter how fearsome Chen Chang Sheng's defence was, he would still be no match for himself.

He felt a bit regretful; previously, when they had entered the tower, if he was to immediately draw Righteous Thought, ignoring that clergyman's suggestion, he wouldn't be retreating in such a humiliating way.

Before the Sword of Righteousness and Knowledge, all fiends must avert themselves; all he needed was but a single move and he could cleave Chen Chang Sheng into defeat.

While thinking this, his right hand had already grasped onto the sword's hilt, needing but a moment to draw the sword from its

sheathe.

The motion for drawing a sword is really simplistic, something he had practised countless times; the time needed was short to the point where it could be considered non-existent.

Alas, time was an eternal existence that couldn't be destroyed.

No matter how short, it still needed time.

Huo Guang's pupils suddenly shrunk.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't give him that short period of time.

From outside of the tower, Huo Guang had received a message from Li Palace clergy, coming to know that Chen Chang Sheng had displayed an astonishing speed in the first round. For this, he had prepared himself, giving it sufficient consideration in his planning, yet, he couldn't have expected that Chen Chang Sheng's so-called "astonishing speed"... was this astonishing.

Chen Chang Sheng was too fast, to the point that his hand had only just touched upon his sword's hilt and yet, Chen Chang Sheng had already arrived before him.

By the time the Sword of Righteous Thought had left its sheathe by half a foot, Chen Chang Sheng's fist was only half a foot away from his chest.

Huo Guang knew that he wouldn't make it in time, his face instantly paled; his True Essence wildly exploded outwards, forming a shrill hiss, bursting from his lips.

At the same time, his right foot lightly stepped towards the ground.

That's right, it didn't heavily land, but lightly.

Even in such a tense situation, his steps still remained light, akin to stepping onto a cloud.

Previously, his fist had hollowly struck upon the ground, the sand that had scattered up before him, looked akin to a cloud.

His right foot, lightly stepped upon the cloud of sand.

Very softly, very lithely, very miraculously.

It was as if he had also become a floating cloud, drifting upwards.

“A superb Unfettered Cloud.”

A sound of praise could be heard from the Hall of Zhao Wen.

Unknown as to if it was the Bishop of Temple Seminary or

someone else, they had actually started cheering for a student of the South's Scholartree Manor; it could be seen how much pressure Chen Chang Sheng's participation in the examination and that declaration, had brought upon these people.

As for those three teacher representatives for the Southern Sects that were seated upon the guest seating, their expressions were full of content, stroking their beards silently.

Huo Guang's performance was indeed worthy of praise. A young cultivator that had yet to complete their Ethereal Opening could actually utilise Scholartree Manor's motion technique, Unfettered Cloud, so perfectly; under such a tense situation, he could still display such a tranquil aura, it had to be said, the training of disciples for Scholartree Manor was indeed impressive.

More importantly, this manoeuvre of the motion technique, Unfettered Cloud, could possibly bring a big reversal to this battle.

Chen Chang Sheng was very fast, hence, he couldn't stop. His fist was very strong, hence, it couldn't turn.

For something travelling straight, when it wants to change its direction, the faster it's travelling, the greater the amount of force required, or perhaps some tremendously high level skill for controlling True Essence.

That type of skill was very rare, searching across all the academies and sects on the continent, it wouldn't number more than three.

Within the Capital, there wasn't a single academy with that type of skill; within the line of White Emperor City, there also wasn't this type of manoeuvre.

Even if Chen Chang Sheng wanted to learn this, he wouldn't know where to seek it.

Therefore, his fist could only encounter empty air.

While Huo Guang continued rising with the clouds.

The two were about to enter a vantage of high and low; Huo Guang held the Sword of Righteous Thought within his hand.

This match's winner was perhaps about to change.

Yet, at the next moment, the hands of those few Southern sect representatives suddenly stiffened.

One of the elders even ripped off a few strands from his white beard.

Within the Hall of Zhao Wen, sounds of exclamation rang out.

Chapter 151 – The Sky

Chen Chang Sheng's speed was indeed very fast and his punch was indeed very straight.

Logically, his punch was sure to hit thin air, unable to land upon Huo Guang, who had used the graceful motion technique, Unfettered Cloud to soar upwards.

His punch did indeed hit thin air; it landed upon the air and let out a resonating sound, akin to an old bell being rung.

The formless air seemed to have been crushed under this strike.

Yet, his punch didn't stop, continuing to advance forwards.

From within the air that had been struck, there seemed to appear a path. That path couldn't be seen with the naked eye, yet gave people a sense that it was a real existence.

The important figures within the hall, gazing at the scene upon the mirror, could also feel the existence of that path.

That path was something sculpted out by Chen Chang Sheng's punch, but it wasn't straight, it was an arc, its front lightly sloping upwards.

This formless line was very smooth, very pleasant to gaze at,

having a type of natural beauty.

How could a perfectly straight punch, strike out a curved path?

There could only be one explanation and that was, upon the last moment of his fist manifestation's projection, it had changed direction.

What fist technique existed in this world that can do this?

Huo Guang soared towards the sky.

Chen Chang Sheng's fist followed that formless arced line and headed towards the sky.

“A Sword that Searns the Heavens.”

Xue Xing Chuan's shocked voice erupted within the Hall of Zhao Wen.

There was indeed no fist technique that could change the direction of its fist manifestation at the last moment.

The personages within the hall were all knowledgeable people, they are certain that there didn't exist such a technique.

But there did exist a sword art which could achieve this,

changing the direction of a sword manifestation at the final moment of a sword manoeuvre.

Previously, the personages within the hall had silently counted within their minds that there were approximately three skills that could do this, this sword art was one of them.

Li Shan Sword Arts' Sword of Searing Heaven.

Successive sounds of moving chairs could be heard scraping against the ground from within the Hall of Zhao Wen.

These important figures all rose in surprise, staring at the mirror and the scene of the youth who was currently clenching his fist and slamming into the heavens, they were shocked beyond reason.

How could a student of Orthodox Academy have possibly learnt a secret sword of Li Mountain's Sword Secrets that isn't taught to others?

It was said that the Sword of Searing Heaven from Li Shan Sword Arts was something self-created by that legendary Junior Uncle of Li Mountain.

It was never shown to others, until several hundred years ago, having returned to Li Mountain after travelling the four seas, had he recorded this sword manoeuvre into the main form of Li Shan Sword Arts after incessant pleading from the then current substitute headmaster.

This sword manoeuvre was very famous, but very few people trained it, that was because this move is very hard to practise, its requirements on condensing divine sense was far too high.

Within this generation of disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect, it was said that only Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi knew this move.

Currently, this move had appeared within the hands of Chen Chang Sheng.

He hadn't used a sword, but a fist.

A Sword that Sears the Heavens naturally became a fist that slams into the heavens.

Between his fist and the deep blue sky above, was Huo Guang.

Therefore, before his fist slams into the deep blue sky, it needed to land upon Huo Guang's body.

A loud explosion reverberated.

This was the sound created by a fist landing upon a body.

Chen Chang Sheng's fist explosively landed upon Huo Guang's chest.

Simple, accurate, powerful.

A second explosion rung out.

This was the sound of a body clashing with the air.

Huo Guang's body suddenly rose farther from the ground, flying towards the sky, momentarily after, it became but a small black speck.

Outside of the tower, the examinees stood before the stone steps, awaiting the match's conclusion.

It was at this moment, that they heard the sound of two successive explosions.

Due to the silencing array used within the tower, they previously hadn't been able to hear anything, neither had they seen any projections of sword manifestations in the sky above, unlike in the battle between Tang Thirty-Six and Liang Ban Hu.

This inevitably led to them looking down slightly upon Huo Guang and Chen Chang Sheng.

Until those two thunderous explosions reverberated, akin to having detonated right beside their ears.

The examinees were astounded beyond belief; following the explosions, came the howling of air being breached; gazes turned upwards, seeing the figure that flew towards the heavens.

The grounds were dead silent, a lot of the examinees had their jaws hanging, yet no one said anything.

They all stared wide-eyed at the figure that was hurtling to some incredibly high location and its subsequent descent.

Momentarily after, a faint tremor could be felt from the ground.

The examinees all lowered their heads and looked towards their feet, then they lifted their heads and looked at the Tower of Purging Dust, they were too astonished for words, to the point where they felt as if their hearts were also trembling.

That tremor, it should have been that person impacting onto the ground?

The majority of examinees didn't see clearly as to who it was that was sent flying up into the air, but for some reason, they all subconsciously concluded that it wouldn't have been Chen Chang Sheng.

Within the tower.

Chen Chang Sheng stood, with his right foot in front and left leg behind, looking akin to a bow.

His right arm was slightly angled, fist towards the sky, akin to a

torch.

Huo Guang had been sent flying.

He withdrew his fist and right leg, standing straight, turning his gaze skywards.

His line of sight shifted upwards and then down; following that figure and returning to within the tower.

A thud resounded, dust abounded and the ground lightly tremored.

The dust gradually settled, Huo Guang lay upon the ground, continuously spewing up blood, having an untold amount of broken bones.

From the moment he had left the ground, the examiners from the second floor had rushed down, making preparations for emergency treatment.

The clergywoman from Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green continuously poured upon him a clear radiance, helping to stanch his bleeding, ensuring that he wouldn't suffer from the danger of death, only then, would he be moved over to Li Palace.

Lying upon the sand strewn floor and staring at the deep blue heavens above, Huo Guang's expression was filled with pain while his eyes were filled with anger and unwillingness to accept his

state; what he felt even greater amounts of, was bewilderment.

He couldn't understand; why did he lose this match.

It had to be known that he already knew who his opponent was going to be from before his entering of the Capital.

If Chen Chang Sheng couldn't even pass the Martial Trial, then he naturally wouldn't be able to participate in the Duelling Stage. If he couldn't even pass the first round of the duelling phase, then they naturally wouldn't run into each other.

All he knew was that if Chen Chang Sheng entered the second round, they would become opponents, he would become an unscalable mountain. History would be corrected at this moment and the alliance between the North and South would be put back on track...

Yet, he current lay upon the floor, having sustained severe injuries, unable to move; even an act as simple as turning his neck was something he couldn't do.

He wanted to say something to Chen Chang Sheng, but he couldn't look at him, nor could he say any words, all he could do was to stare at the deep blue skies above.

The sky within the Education Palace was far lower than the sky outside, previously, he had even felt as if he would touch upon that piece of heaven.

Just as how he had felt he could easily defeat Chen Chang Sheng, when they were still outside of the tower.

Yet reality was, the heavens could not be reached.

Neither could he win against Chen Chang Sheng.

Why was this?

Chen Chang could have pondered over Huo Guang and those important personages behind him, pondered over their current complex emotions, their feelings and their thoughts, but he didn't. The feelings and thoughts were unrelated to him, whether if their poison was his tonic or not, it had nothing to do with him; he would never waste time on such pointless matters.

He didn't look at Huo Guang whom was lying upon the floor, instead turning towards the Li Palace clergy member in charge of the duelling phase and did a formal gesture, then he headed out of the tower.

That clergy member came from the Education Board, seeing the image of that youth's back, they praisefully nodded their head.

From entering the tower to leaving, Chen Chang Sheng hadn't uttered a single word.

Before the start of the match, Huo Guang had said he wouldn't use words to insult him, because it was both shameless and dull,

that he would simply defeat him.

Chen Chang Sheng had used reality to show his opponent that saying anything at all was inherently dull and inane.

I am here for a duel, not a conversation, not to mention we're not familiar with each, we don't even know each other.

In the same way, before the start of the match, Huo Guang had said to him from some lofty ideological position that if he didn't draw his sword, he wouldn't have the chance to draw it again.

Chen Chang Sheng had used reality to show him, that he himself was the person who needed to draw his sword.

Within the Hall of Zhao Wen, it had once again returned to being quiet.

Those present, had used a long period of time before finally suppressing the shock they felt within their hearts.

Mo Yu looked upon the deserted sand covered floor displayed on the mirror, the edge of her lips lightly twitched, as if she wanted to laugh, in the end, she maintained a look of cold indifference.

Xue Xing Chuan looked towards His Eminence, Mei Li Sha, he felt a lot of perplexity over the ability displayed by Chen Chang Sheng.

It was only at this moment that they noticed, unknown when,

His Eminence had once again closed his eyes, as if he had once again started to sleep.

Only, the wrinkles upon his face had loosened considerably.

The old age spots that had been rather unsightly, had also diminished considerably.

Upon his face, a faint smile could be seen.

Chapter 152 – The Barefooted Youth; Resolved Girl

The Sword of Searing Heaven is a secret sword, even elders from the bluffs of the Longevity Sect do not know it, only the disciples of Li Mountain could come into contact with it.

Chen Chang Sheng has never been to Li Mountain in his entire life; why did he know this technique?

For ordinary people, this was something hard to explain, to the point where it might become a lifelong puzzle, but the personages currently within the hall knew of more events and the past than ordinary people, it didn't take them long to remember that hundreds of years ago, in the struggle against the demon race, a certain event once happened, that event, upon the tumultuous battlefield, was not overly noteworthy, but it had extremely far-reaching consequences.

After that event, the full form of Li Shan Sword Sect's Sword Arts were sent to White Emperor City.

“According to the agreement at that time, the Sword Secrets could only be kept within the line of the White Emperor and were strictly prohibited from being passed on to outsiders, on what basis was Chen Chang Sheng allowed to learn it?”

“That's because Chen Chang Sheng is Her Highness' tutor.”

“So that also works? With that type of thinking, aren't you suggesting all students of Orthodox Academy can learn Li Shan Sword Arts from now on?”

“If Her Highness wishes as such, then it shall be; if Li Shan Sword Sect does not agree with this, then they can go and reason with His Royal Majesty, The White Emperor.”

“Disregarding the discussion on the Sword Arts; what did Chen Chang Sheng do for his Purification? How could his body strength possibly be so high? Without the use of tools or armaments, for his defence to be this difficult to breach, just what kind of extraordinary encounter did he have?”

Within the hall, a lot of gazes turned towards His Eminence's direction, full of enquiry, they thought to themselves, could it have been some sort of secret art utilised by the Education Board?

His Eminence didn't say anything; currently, within this world, those who possibly knew the truth behind Chen Chang Sheng's extraordinary encounter, numbered three, with The Archbishop being one of them.

Mo Yu was also currently pondering this issue; as she had thought earlier, she knew that Luo Luo used to stay at the Hundred Herb Garden, Chen Chang Sheng must be very familiar with all the rare medicinal herbs within the garden, she also knew that Chen Chang Sheng's master, Taoist Ji is a renowned physician on the continent that excels with refining medicine, but all of this was insufficient for explaining how Chen Chang Sheng's body had become this incredibly strong.

Xue Xing Chuan once again thought of Zhou Du Fu, but at the

next moment, shook his head, denying his speculation, this is because such a line of thought was far too preposterous and unrealistic.

The Grand Examination was one of the most important events on the continent, but for important personages, the examination's main aim was the selection of talent, its real meaning lay in the future; therefore, they had been very placid, without the need for close observation, peacefully sitting within the Hall of Zhao Wen, with the two Archbishops of the Holy Church even arriving late.

Yet, this year's examination had brought too many surprises and shock for them. Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue had yet to enter the stage, Her Highness, Luo Luo, didn't have any opportunity to display her strength in the first round and Zhe Xiu was still concealed upon his grassy plains; they could no longer sit firmly upon their seats.

Mo Yu stood up and said: "I want to go and see."

Xue Xing Chuan, Xu Shi Ji and a lot of important figures in the hall followed suit, standing and leaving the Hall of Zhao Wen, heading towards the Hall of Clear Virtue, preparing to enter the Green Leaf World so that they may observe the remainder of the examination in close proximity.

With the departure of people, the hall turned empty, leaving only Mei Li Sha by himself.

This Archbishop of the Education Board, leader of the tradition

faction within the Orthodoxy, slowly raised his head, gazing at the sand covered floor upon the mirror, seeming as if he was still looking at the previous youth, he remained silent and expressionless, unknown as to his mood, nor what he was currently thinking of, giving others an especially dilapidated feeling.

A number of months ago, at the Ivy League gathering, Chen Chang Sheng had been confined within the derelict garden by Mo Yu, subsequently choosing to enter the Black Dragon Pond, these events were all known to him, he even knew that Her Divine Majesty was watching that night, he only didn't know as to what happened after Chen Chang Sheng met that Black Dragon while underground.

From what could currently be seen, it seems the actual important event didn't happen long ago.

Bathing in dragon's blood and obtaining new life? The Archbishop's face lit up with a hard to interpret smile.

That Black Dragon was actually willing to bear such a large sacrifice for you? What does she want to obtain from you?

In truth, with regards to Chen Chang Sheng's chances of obtaining first upon the First Banner, he never did have high hopes, that declaration which stunned the entire continent was only for increasing the pressure on Chen Chang Sheng.

Only pressure, could make Chen Chang Sheng mature as quickly

as possible.

Currently, he could actually see some hope from Chen Chang Sheng's performance, though it was but a sliver and the chances were extremely low, it was still hope.

How could he not feel glad?

The Tower of Purging Dust opened, Chen Chang Sheng walked out.

In the first round, he had walked out with his right boot destroyed, this time, both his boots were destroyed.

He stood above the stone steps, barefooted, his uniform in tatters, looking akin to a little beggar.

Yet, no one actually considered him to be a little beggar, this time, everyone was truly stunned, especially once the Li Palace clergy stated that Huo Guang was severely injured and had been carried out of the Education Palace for treatment, as Su Mo Yu had. Their feelings of shock reached some zenith; previously, only Zhe Xiu had managed to severely injure his opponent while under observation of the venerable Li Palace clergy, unexpectedly, Chen Chang Sheng has now also managed this.

The question was, how did he do it?

Guan Fei Bai was very confused, asking: "That fellow was still an

ordinary person at the time of the Ivy League gathering; not many days have passed since, yet he's become this strong?"

Gou Han Shi replied: "I've already said, he's not an ordinary person."

The shocked stares of the crowd followed him to the woodlands.

Xuan Yuan Po smiled simply as he went up to receive him.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at him as he forced out a laugh and said: "Can you give me some aid please."

Luo Luo, who was by the side, immediately had a small change to her expression when she heard those words. Realising that he appeared fine, but had actually suffered fairly heavy injuries, to the point where even walking was a bit of a strain, she rushed to provide him some aid.

Arriving at the white poplar tree, he sat down, near Tang Thirty-Six, his brows lightly locked together, evidently in some pain.

In the tower, when he broke through the storm of fists, he had suffered 7 blows of Regiment Shattering Fist.

Even if his body was strong, it was still rather painful to bear, the blow to the right side of his chest was especially severe, no ribs were broken, but there should be fractures.

If he had used Discerning Steps, or drew his sword, he could have probably won more easily, without this much pain.

As with the decision he had instantly made at the arena, his aim wasn't a simple duel, but first position upon the First Banner, therefore, he had to reach the final stage of the duelling and had to reserve some of his methods.

Scholartree Manor did indeed excel at teaching their young disciples, Huo Guang had the strength to place at least within the top 50 on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, but he was too arrogant and inexperienced, perhaps prone to underestimating his opponent.

Taking some risk for his final goal is worthwhile.

“It's over, this time I really can't raise my head when I'm around you anymore.”

Tang Thirty-Six had sustained fairly heavy injuries in his battle against Liang Ban Hu and had been resting on the white poplar. Seeing Chen Chang Sheng that was beside him and thinking that this fellow actually managed to reach the third round, getting slightly further than he had, this inevitably caused him to be slightly annoyed, he stuffed one of the crystals in his hand into Chen Chang Sheng's and said: “It's only your luck being slightly better.”

These words had a ring of truth, after all, how could Huo Guang possibly compare to Liang Ban Hu. Chen Chang Sheng laughed,

but didn't answer him, seeing Luo Luo's small face filled with worry, he said: "I'm fine, you don't have to worry."

Luo Luo looked at his dirt covered feet and rushed to take out two new boots from behind her, placed it by the side, then took out a handkerchief from her sleeve.

From the look of things, it seemed she was preparing to help Chen Chang Sheng clean his feet.

Chen Chang Sheng obviously wouldn't dare to let her do this, they weren't in the library at Orthodox Academy, this was within His Holiness' Green Leaf World, tens of examinees and even more venerable Li Palace clergy were currently looking in their direction. He didn't want their fiery anger to burn him into smouldering ash; he quickly took the handkerchief.

"Your Highness, with the way he's fighting, you might need to prepare more boots," said Tang Thirty-Six seriously, with a hint of complaint.

Tang Thirty-Six continued: "There are another four rounds till the end, you will need at least another three pairs of boots."

His words were intended to tease the master and disciple pair, but he couldn't have guessed that Luo Luo would instead become happy, cheerfully saying: "May it be as you say."

Tang Thirty-Six was baffled, before coming to realise that he had

subconsciously espoused the opinion that Chen Chang Sheng could reach the end.

“There’s no need to prepare additional boots, in the coming rounds, I’ll take care not to bare my feet,” said Chen Chang Sheng without waiting for Tang Thirty-Six to explain himself, he then turned his gaze to Luo Luo and said: “You should just concede for this round.”

A master commands, a disciple obeys; Luo Luo had always listened to his words, but this time, she didn’t.

“No.”

Her reply was very swift and decisive, carrying with it the hint of a young girl pouting, or perhaps what could be called “tsundere”.

“You can’t defeat him,” Chen Chang Sheng looked towards the far off Tian Hai Sheng Xue, remained silent momentarily, then said: “Not to mention, he’s also giving me a rather dangerous feeling today.”

The three people by the woodlands didn’t notice his use of the word “also”.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue was very quiet today, especially subdued, therefore the feeling he gave others was especially strange.

This was because his family background had already decided, he

couldn't be subdued.

In this year's Grand Examination, apart from Luo Luo, his background was the grandest and most fearsome.

Not to mention, his temperament had never been associated with being subdued and quiet; a subdued person would never destroy Orthodox Academy's front gate first thing after arriving back at the Capital from Yung Xue Pass.

Yet, he really was subdued today, from the start of the examination till now, he had remained quiet without saying anything, standing akin to an ordinary examinee within the crowd, even his expressions had remained relatively unmoved throughout.

A lot of people had noticed his silence, Chen Chang Sheng had as well, he felt that this was very dangerous.

If it could be said that the attention that wolf-tribe youth directed towards Luo Luo gave him the greatest feeling of danger, then Tian Hai Sheng Xue would have been second.

This was because both of them had the ability to defeat Luo Luo.

Especially Tian Hai Sheng Xue.

As Her Divine Majesty's most favoured grandnephew, he didn't remain within the Capital, passing an affluent lifestyle, but had

travelled to the far away Yung Xue Pass to battle against the demon race, because he had always desired to be strong.

Then, he really had broken through the barrier of life and death on the battlefield beyond Yung Xue Pass, completing his Ethereal Opening.

In this year's examination, he and Gou Han Shi were the two strongest.

Luo Luo knew that she wasn't Tian Hai Sheng Xue's equal, but she was still resolved to fight against him in the match.

Chen Chang Sheng stood up, escorting her with his gaze to the tower, his expression sombre, full of concern.

Tang Thirty-Six dug out a hard piece of bark from the white poplar, accurately striking him on the head with it and said: "You really don't understand why Her Highness wants to participate in the examination?"

Chapter 153 – ...Without Battling

Luo Luo could directly enter the Mausoleum of Books to observe the monument, but she still appealed before His Holiness' seat for an entire night, requesting entry into the Grand Examination, why? This was because she wanted to help sweep away all obstacles for her tutor, Chen Chang Sheng.

In the duelling phase, for every opponent she defeated, Chen Chang Sheng would have one less.

From this perspective, the stronger the opponent she is matched against, the closer it would fit her intent. Especially with the two considered to be the strongest, Gou Han Shi and Tian Hai Sheng Xue, even if she couldn't defeat them, she would still try and make them expend a lot of effort on her, at least causing them to sustain fairly heavy injuries. With this, when Chen Chang Sheng matches up against them, he could retain a modicum of hope.

Therefore, when she drew Tian Hai Sheng Xue for the second round, everyone present was shocked, only, she was very calm, perhaps even a little happy.

Chen Chang Sheng hadn't thought about the reason why Luo Luo wanted to participate in the Grand Examination, at this time, being reminded by Tang Thirty-Six, all it took was some consideration and the reason became clear, because of this, he lowered his head to look at the brand new boots on his feet, remaining quiet for a long time, before lifting his head and saying to Tang Thirty-Six: "I will definitely win."

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him and said: "That isn't something

you should be saying to me, but something you should tell her.”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “I don’t need to tell her; she also knows.”

While they were conversing, the door to the tower once again closed.

Today’s duelling was being conducted in the Tower of Purging Dust, that door was destined to close countless times, soon, it will continue to close many more times; the hinges’ creaking became ever shriller, but none of the other occasions had engrossed the attention of everyone present as much as this occasion, the creaking sound was most distinct.

This was the strongest battle since this year’s examination had commenced.

A Princess of White Emperor City, with a tremendously strong bloodline talent, able to cause the Proclamation of Azure Clouds to require a sudden update, Her Highness, Luo Luo.

A most favoured grandnephew of Her Divine Majesty, that had successfully completed his Ethereal Opening amidst the bloody battle against experts of the demon race at Yung Xue Pass, Tian Hai Sheng Xue.

Such a match could naturally captivate everyone’s attention.

The lonely youth, who had kept himself separate from the crowd and turned his back on the entire world, had also turned his gaze towards the tower.

Within the deepest parts of Wo Fu Zhe Xiu's ice-like eyes, the flickers of a flame were currently growing.

Within the tower, it was very peaceful.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Luo Luo stood opposite from each other; they calmly greeted each other, then stood straight.

Neither raised their hand against each other.

The sunlight within the Green Leaf World shone upon Tian Hai Sheng Xue's face, his complexion was whiter than snow.

Luo Luo stood quietly, her picturesque looks within this picturesque world remained charmingly pretty.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue quietly listened to the sounds transmitted from outside, then suddenly started laughing.

It couldn't be denied that his laughter was slightly beguiling.

Luo Luo was naturally not enticed, but she was slightly perplexed, Tian Hai Sheng Xue had never laughed outside of the tower, why was he laughing at this moment?

"A lot of people wish for me to battle against Your Highness, because in the duelling phase of the examination, only I and Gou

Han Shi can defeat you; yet, in comparison to Gou Han Shi, I seem to be more suited to battling against you.”

He continued: “This is because even if I really was to hurt you, the Royal White Emperor Couple wouldn’t be too resentful of me, in consideration of Her Divine Majesty.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue looked at her with a small smile on his face and said: “That’s right, a lot of people wish to use my hand to eliminate Your Highness, the strongest of Orthodox Academy, from this tournament, as for your intention, I am well aware of, you only wish to act as a convoy for Chen Chang Sheng. Only, there is something I don’t understand, even if you are able to defeat everyone, how could you ensure he will continue to win himself?”

Luo Luo replied: “As the disciple, I need to do everything within my power, regardless of how far my tutor may reach.”

“Interesting, no, very interesting.”

The smile upon Tian Hai Sheng Xue’s face gradually receded, he calmly, or maybe even indifferently, said: “It’s a pity, this match was the wish of two Eminent Archbishops of the Orthodoxy, the wish of my clan, the wish of certain personages within the Palace and the wish of many others, only, they haven’t considered for my own wishes.”

Within a quiet and secluded room inside the tower, there was a row of over ten chairs.

Two Esteemed Archbishops of the Orthodoxy's Holy Church were respectively sat upon the Eastern and Western ends; Mo Yu and Prince Chen Liu were sat in the centre; Xue Xing Chuan, Xu Shi Ji, the Bishop of Temple Seminary, the principal of Star Seizer Academy, the three representatives of the Southern sects and a number of other important figures were sat upon the remaining chairs.

In this year's examination, those young cultivators had brought far too many surprises and shock, these important figures wanted to observe the match from a closer location, ensuring that no problems will arise, hence, they had come to the tower from the Hall of Zhao Wen.

The first match they were about to watch, was the strongest battle, this was also one of their aims.

Luo Luo and Tian Hai Sheng Xue's match could proceed and a victor could be decided, but it definitely could not result like the matches between Zhe Xiu and Su Mo Yu or the one between Chen Chang Sheng and Huo Guang.

The examiners in charge of the grounds had been caught unprepared, being unable to react in time, resulting in examinees getting seriously injured; this was something they had to personally ensure, as they had promised His Holiness and the Tian Hai clan.

Yet, they never could have guessed, this match that had captivated countless gazes, from its very start, had entered a surprising direction. As surprising as how subdued and quiet Tian Hai Sheng Xue had been today in the examination.

There was no hail of whips or snow enveloping the Northern Pass,

only the sound of Tian Hai Sheng Xue's calm voice could be heard continuously within the tower.

That's correct, no one had considered Tian Hai Sheng Xue's wishes; this was but the wish of the entire Tian Hai clan.

Hearing his words, the expressions of the two Archbishops of the Holy Church and several other personages all changed somewhat.

“What does a wish mean? A wish means a goal. I naturally have my own goal in life, an aim.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue gave a glance towards the second floor, then withdrew his gaze. He then looked towards Luo Luo, maintaining his calm and mindful manner, saying: “For these past few years, the Capital has always had the rumour that I envy Prince Chen Liu, because from a young age, he has been allowed to remain in the Imperial Palace, allowed to study alongside Ping Guo and Mo Yu. In reality, the rumours are wrong, the one I envy is actually Mo Yu.”

“People of the world can only see the adoration and trust Her Divine Majesty has for her, the power and glory bestowed upon her, yet, those eyes that have been dazzled by glory do not notice that she has already reached the Star Fusion Realm at such a young age.”

He continued: “The Star Fusion Realm... these past few years, everyone has been talking of Xu You Rong, Qiu Shan Jun, in previous years, everyone had been talking of Wang Po and Xiao

Zhang, yet, hardly anyone had thought about how strong she is.”

Within the quiet secluded room on the second floor, a lot of gazes fell upon Mo Yu, her expression was indifferent, as if what Tian Hai Sheng Xue had said was not related to her at all.

“That’s right, I am the most promising individual in the martial path amongst those of the Tian Hai clan, everyone believes that my intention in coming back to the Capital from Yung Xue Pass and entering the Grand Examination is to place first upon the First Banner, yet... with Qiu Shan Jun not attending, what meaning is there to placing first? Can it prove that I am stronger than Mo Yu?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue suddenly stopped his words, remaining quiet for a very long time before opening his mouth and continuing: “Right, even if I was to defeat Qiu Shan Jun, I still cannot prove that I am stronger than her, though, the past me, would probably be willing to strive for first place upon the First Banner in the examination, because it still is an achievement.”

Luo Luo looked at him, not understanding and asked: “And you currently don’t think this?”

“What is the aim of cultivation? Strength. What is the aim of strength? It is to survive and then possess an even greater power and influence, obtaining even more.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue looked at her and calmly said: “The past me would consider placing first to be the most important thing, it

could at least help to bolster my confidence a little in front of Mo Yu, but currently, the Grand Examination's significance for me is that I will meet Your Highness and that you require my failure."

Upon finishing those words, he once again looked at the second floor, carrying a slight air of defiance, he said: "I suggest all of you refrain from listening to the following words I will say, as they will be troublesome for all of you."

Chapter 154 – Winning...

Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Luo Luo both stood upon the sand within the Tower of Purging Dust, with their backgrounds combined, it was enough to constrain everyone on the second floor.

Of course, those on the second floor were all important figures, but his warning was very clear and these personages all had their own factions; being from different factions, yet in the same room watching each other, rendered them unable to continue listening even if they wished to.

The room was very quiet, tranquil and secluded, the light that came in through the window wasn't very bright. Sitting in the centre, Mo Yu remained silent for a time, with her eyes closed and a look of indifference on her face, as if she was about to rest for a while, in truth, she was using this action to express her stance; she wasn't going to listen to what Tian Hai Sheng Xue had to say.

Xue Xing Chuan lightly frowned, the two Archbishops of the Holy Church slowly closed their eyes and consequently, several light sounds could be heard as the wooden shutters outside of the windows rolled down, the sky became dull and the silencing array activated; sounds could no longer be heard from the floor below. As for the Li Palace clergy that were elsewhere, they were surely even more lacking in the courage to eavesdrop and would think of their own methods to “deafen” themselves.

After a while, Tian Hai Sheng Xue no longer tried to confirm whether if there were any eavesdroppers, nor did he care, he looked towards Luo Luo and continued talking: “Using first upon the First Banner to prove my strength is meaningless towards my

life and the acquirement of greater power and influence, therefore, I am willing to forgo it.”

Luo Luo said: “First upon the First Banner is a hard to obtain achievement, able to increase your standing within Her Divine Majesty’s mind.”

“And then?” Tian Hai Sheng Xue replied with an expressionless face: “Within the younger generation of the Tian Hai clan’s third generation, I am already the most outstanding, what benefit is there to becoming even more outstanding? The ones to decide this clan’s fate will still be my father and his brothers.”

Luo Luo looked at him and asked: “So you are preparing to exchange first place for something you need?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue replied: “Correct, which is why I previously said that the Grand Examination’s importance is in the fact that I will meet Your Highness and that Your Highness requires my failure.”

Luo Luo considered for a moment, then asked: “What do you wish for?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue quietly looked at her and said: “I wish to exchange it for Your Highness’ friendship.”

Luo Luo replied without any hesitation: “Not possible.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue said with a self-mocking tone: “It seems the name of Tian Hai really has already become resented to the world.”

Luo Luo replied: “No, I only think that friendship isn’t something you can exchange, it can only be nurtured.”

“Reasonable,” Tian Hai Sheng Xue’s expression became serious and he said: “Then will I have the chance to nurture a friendship with Your Highness?”

Luo Luo said: “This isn’t something I can decide upon; I will have to listen to my tutor.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue gave it a thought, Chen Chang Sheng shouldn’t have any good impressions of himself, he then asked: “Perhaps, does Your Highness have an older female cousin?”

Luo Luo was highly intelligent, how could she miss his intent, she replied with some confusion: “My maternal cousin lives on the Great Western Continent, but... if I’m not mistaken, aren’t you going to marry Ping Guo next year?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue replied: “You should know very clearly that Ping Guo likes Qiu Shan, what meaning is there in marrying her? Not to mention, marrying her can only make me die a little faster.”

Luo Luo understood his meaning, she thought for a little, then said: “This isn’t something I can decide upon, I will have to listen

to my parents.”

“Then what can I exchange from Your Highness?” asked Tian Hai Sheng Xue, with his brow lightly raised.

Luo Luo was also rather distressed, saying: “I really don’t know.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue looked towards the tightly shut windows on the second floor and suddenly said: “A promise?”

Luo Luo’s expression softly trembled, replying: “When it happens, I won’t necessarily have the ability to fulfil my promise.”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue calmly replied: “I believe in You Highness’ integrity, as long as you sincerely try to uphold your promise, I will accept it.”

Luo Luo said: “This is too unfavourable for you.”

He replied: “Using something I do not yet possess to exchange for something most worthy of pursuing, even if it only exists as a possibility for the future, it’s worthwhile.”

Luo Luo suddenly felt some sympathy for him, asking: “Why go this far?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue laughed, seeming rather lonely, and replied: “Perhaps this is the price of maturity.”

Finishing those words, he turned and headed out of the tower.

Luo Luo watched his fading back, feeling a little maudlin.

For those born to Royal families, not all are as lucky as she.

Of course, she also had her own misfortune or perhaps difficulties; they had just yet to arrive.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue was undoubtedly a clever person.

He had used a single match in the examination in exchange for some kind of future guarantee.

As with the last words between him and Luo Luo.

Why go this far?

He had to go this far.

The wooden shutters rolled up and sunlight once again came in. Sound once again travelled into the quiet and secluded room; the sound of Tian Hai Sheng Xue's footsteps.

Silence.

No one knew of what Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Luo Luo had discussed and in truth, even if they had heard their conversation, they wouldn't be able to ascertain what sort of agreement the two had come to.

Those present were all important figures with sufficient intelligence, it was just, apart from Prince Chen Liu, none of the others had Luo Luo and Tian Hai Sheng Xue's family background and therefore had difficulty understanding their biggest fears.

Everyone only saw Tian Hai Sheng Xue's departure, giving up on this match.

Mo Yu glanced at the two Archbishops of the Holy Church who had stern expressions upon their faces, thinking to herself that Tian Hai Sheng Xue was, in the end, surnamed Tian Hai, how could he be exploited by you? Even his father couldn't.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue directly left the Education Palace and no longer continued to participate in the examination, since his results in the Academic Exam will at least place him within the top 5, no one would dare to place him outside of the Three Grades.

The Li Palace clergy member stood atop the stone steps and announced: "Orthodox Academy, Her Highness, Luo Luo, winning without battling."

Winning without battling?

This incredibly attention-grabbing match between strong fighters, didn't even proceed? Tian Hai Sheng Xue actually

withdrew from the tournament? The examinees outside of the tower were all greatly startled, not knowing exactly what had happened inside the tower.

Luo Luo returned to the woodlands.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at her, not understanding, and asked: “What happened?”

Luo Luo’s small face displayed some bewilderment, it wasn’t the bewilderment of not knowing something in full, but bewilderment from being emotional.

She looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said: “Sir, I’ve promised him that I won’t tell anyone, including you and my Royal Parents, I’m sorry.”

Chen Chang Sheng was stunned, replying: “It’s fine. If that’s the case, it’ll be better if you don’t say.”

The second round officially came to an end, following this was the third round, with duelling between the last 16.

This third round also had drawing lots, but it was different from that of the second round; for this round, the lot drawing was actually not as tense, examinees that have entered this stage are essentially guaranteed to rank within the Three Grades, all they needed was to wait for their overall ranking.

Examinees that have entered the Three Grades and are satisfied, will obviously not care about who they will draw; as for the others that have a higher aim, those wishing to enter the First Grade will

inevitably meet a strong opponent, therefore they also didn't mind who they drew.

For those who lost in the second round, apart from Su Mo Yu and Huo Guang, who had both sustained heavy injuries and couldn't battle again, or Tian Hai Sheng Xue, who had conceded, they all remained at the match grounds, preparing for the subsequent second tournament; outside of the tower, there remained 61 examinees.

The gazes of the examinees typically fell upon the Orthodox Academy group that were by the woodlands.

Would the important figures from the Orthodoxy continue to manipulate the lot drawing; assigning tough opponents to Her Highness and Chen Chang Sheng? This was the only subject everyone present was curious of; after Tian Hai Sheng Xue's departure, the only person remaining that could defeat Her Highness with a degree of certainty, is Gou Han Shi.

There was one more thing that made the examinees nervous, that was as to who would draw that wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu's name. Though it was already the third round and it didn't matter who they drew, nevertheless, no one wanted to face Zhe Xiu.

Being disgracefully defeated would still be fine, but the most important point was that this youth is far too cold-blooded and brutal, getting heavily injured is not a good thing.

The clergy member quickly drew the slip with the fake name Zhang Ting Tao written upon it, Zhe Xiu's opponent was going to be Guan Fei Bai.

Zhe Xiu's face remained expressionless, making it seem especially cold, but from his peaceful gaze it could be seen that he was very satisfied with this opponent.

Guan Fei Bai didn't say anything, remaining very quiet, it couldn't be seen as to what his current mood was.

A battle between the third and fifth upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.

The bloodthirsty wolf-tribe youth from the snow plains against the Divine State's Fourth Law of Li Shan Sword Sect, no matter which of them, their fame was sufficient to elevate this match's status, as for those examinees who believed they no longer cared about the results of the lot drawing, they also let out waves of surprise.

The sounds of surprise didn't stop, in the next moment, they become even louder.

That's because Liang Ban Hu was matched against Qi Jian.

What kind of development was this?

Gou Han Shi's expression became rather stern.

Following this, he drew the name of a young expert from Star Seizer Academy.

Chatter erupted amongst the examinees.

The second round repressed Orthodox Academy; the third round was targeted towards Li Shan Sword Sect?

For this round, Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo's opponents were relatively weak.

But amongst those that aimed for first place upon the First Banner, their luck was not the best.

Heavenly Academy's Zhuang Huan Yu had drawn rather weak opponents for three rounds in a row.

Similarly, there was also Scholartree Manor's Zhong Hui.

Gou Han Shi entered the tower.

This was his first time entering the stage since the duelling phase had started.

After Tian Hai Sheng Xue's departure, amongst the examinees, his power level was the strongest.

This match was naturally rather captivating.

Yet, this match proceeded very calmly, very normally, perhaps even a little too typically.

Not long after, the door once again opened.

Gou Han Shi and that youth from Star Seizer Academy walked out of the tower sequentially.

Whether upon his own body or that of the youth from Star Seizer Academy, not a single blood stain could be seen, it seems neither had sustained any injuries, they didn't even have any dirt upon their bodies, as if a battle didn't even happen between them.

The winner was obviously Gou Han Shi.

“I'm not his match, the difference is far too great.”

Luo Luo stared at Gou Han Shi, who was walking towards the streambank, she felt both admiration and unease, saying: “Even if I was to complete my Ethereal Opening at this very moment, my chances will still be low.”

“What are you daydreaming about?” Chen Chang Sheng continued: “He's my opponent, not yours.”

Gou Han Shi's first match was surprisingly mundane.

Qi Jian against Liang Ban Hu, this fratricidal strife between disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect was even more surprising.

This match was surprisingly intense; the silencing array was

completely unable to cloak the forlorn and horrifying sound of their swords. In the deep blue sky above, there appeared countless crisscrossing lines of sword manifestations, even for those standing outside of the tower, they could feel the danger and power behind those two swords.

The most surprising thing was, the final victor wasn't Liang Ban Hu, but Qi Jian.

Chapter 155 – Regularity

The Tower of Purging Dust opened, Liang Ban Hu and Qi Jian walked out, the clergy member's announcement that Qi Jian was the victor, brought about a commotion; they themselves didn't have much of a reaction, quietly talking to each other, as if they didn't care about the slashes and blood stains that covered their clothing; between the gaps, there were still remnants of the saintly radiance used to heal them.

They walked down the steps, heading towards the streambank, continuing to converse in hushed tones as they walked.

Some of the examinees were closer and could hear that the two fellow disciples were actually discussing their match: you didn't use this move properly; Senior used that manoeuvre too slowly...

For these past few years, the Divine State's Seven Laws were the idols or perhaps better described as aim, for many amongst the younger generation.

The battle records of these seven disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect were circulated across the world and were a relished topic of conversation for many people, just as how Qi Jian had lost to Zhang Huan Yu by a single move some years ago, due to it being a rare record of defeat for the Divine State's Seven Laws, it was analysed and discussed ceaselessly.

But very few had witnessed a battle between the fellow disciples.

It wasn't until today that people finally knew why the younger

generation of Li Shan Sword Sect are so powerful; why the Divine State's Seven Laws are so astounding.

Being able to employ all their strength in a battle between members of the same school, yet not retaining any hatred or resentment, for them, this was but a standard affair.

Carrying out such a regular activity makes it extraordinary, how could Li Mountain not be strong?

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the four disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect by the streambank, feeling a little dejected and said: "It seems my loss to Liang Ban Hu was a matter of course; Qi Jian is also far stronger than I am."

This statement of "loss" and "stronger", was not referring to power levels, but something else.

Chen Chang Sheng replied: "We can learn from them."

Tang Thirty-Six glanced at him and said: "How? Don't tell me you haven't noticed that Liang Ban Hu is happy about his loss, genuinely happy."

"Uhm?"

"In the Grand Examination, they can fight as they please without worrying about crippling or killing each other, this makes them especially happy."

“And?”

“I’m not that type of freak, I can’t copy them, I surrender.”

From entering Li Palace early in the morning and then the Education Palace within the Green Leaf World; from the Hall of Zhao Wen to the Tower of Purging Dust; throughout all these locations, the amount of clergy seen by the examinees had been few in number, but in truth, Li Palace in its entirety, or more specifically, the entirety of the Orthodoxy, was working for the Grand Examination

A lot of the clergy that weren’t seen by examinees were busy with various tasks; in the Grand Examination, wanting to die was a difficult thing.

Once again entering the Tower of Purging Dust, Chen Chang Sheng intentionally gave a glance towards the second floor, but didn’t see anyone, he then turned his gaze towards his opponent.

In the third round, his opponent was a young girl; the one who had mocked and ridiculed him at the divine avenue and was finally admonished to tears by Tang Thirty-Six, the little junior from Holy Maiden Peak, Ye Xiao Lian.

Holy Maiden Peak and the Longevity Sect were both large sect organisations within the religious system of the Southern Domain, governing many sects and cloisters, Ye Xiao Lian was from Ci Jian Temple.

In the information provided to Orthodox Academy by the

Education Board, it clearly noted that this young girl's cultivation talent is fairly high, once she reaches a suitable age, it was likely that she would enter the Nan Xi Institute, of course, she could only enter the outer circle for her cultivation.

No matter how high a cultivation talent, Ye Xiao Lian was too young, as one of the youngest participants in the examination, her cultivation level was sure to be unstable, logically, it should have been very difficult for her to enter the third round, but her luck in the lot drawing was extremely good.

In the first round she had easily won, in the second round, her opponent was a common student that had entered the examination after completing the foundation trial. Her level was comparable to her opponent's, but her True Essence levels were not as profound, in the end, she had relied upon an item from her school she had been carrying, in order to propitiously win the match.

After leaving the tower, she had jumped into her senior's arms and cried, unable to restrain her joy.

For the drawing of lots in the third round, she heard the name of Chen Chang Sheng, coming to know that her luck had finally come to an end.

Ye Xiao Lian looked at Chen Chang Sheng, her tender little face full of anxiety and unease, becoming a little pale.

That day upon the divine avenue, she had said that Chen Chang Sheng is a toad that wishes to dine on the Phoenix, she had always believed that he was useless trash, yet who could have guessed that Chen Chang Sheng would actually win two rounds in a row, in the previous round he had even defeated Scholartree Manor's Huo

Guang, different from her lucky draw and obviously relying upon his own strength.

Ye Xiao Lian knew that she wasn't Chen Chang Sheng's match, thinking that she had previously offended this person, made her even more nervous.

At that moment, the examiner's voice came down from the second floor: "If you're ready, then start."

Chen Chang Sheng looked towards Ye Xiao Lian, inclining his head in acknowledgement.

With a single glance from him, Ye Xiao Lian couldn't stop herself from feeling terrified, her eyes became red and her skirt shuddered.

Chen Chang Sheng was a bit startled, wondering what was going on.

Ye Xiao Lian really was very scared, her body continuously quivered, the string of little bells on her wrist shaking alongside her quivering, giving off sharp jingling sounds.

The sharp jingling sounds cleared her head, she gathered her courage and tossed the string of bells from her wrist at Chen Chang Sheng.

She was separated from Chen Chang Sheng by a distance of

around 30 metres, the string of bells managed to arrive before him in an instant.

The string of bells is a tool of Ci Jian Temple, Bells of Mantra, it couldn't possibly compare with a legendary level item like the Thousand Mile Button, but was still extremely powerful, being only slightly weaker than the umbrella used by the Heavenly Academy student Chen Chang Sheng was matched against in the first round.

Were this not the case she would not have been able to rely upon it to win against her opponent in the second round.

The string of bells was made of some unknown metal, its band indistinctly contained some sort of keen sword manifestation. Within its sharp ringing sound there seemed to be some sort of concealed aura that could disturb a cultivator's True Essence flow; alas, it seems Ye Xiao Lian's luck really had been depleted on the previous rounds, her opponent, Chen Chang Sheng, was weakest in terms of True Essence capacity and was least reliant upon using True Essence for battling.

His right hand became a fist that struck out, his fingers then stretched out, becoming akin to a blossoming flower, accurately grabbing the Bells of Mantra.

The Bells of Mantra continuously shook in his hand, as if it was struggling, transferring a massive amount of force to the surroundings, at the same time, that aura which disturbed True Essence flow became increasingly apparent.

The True Essence flow within Chen Chang Sheng was indeed

severely affected, but the problem was, even if the Bells of Mantra was to do nothing, his True Essence flow would already have problems flowing freely, with his meridian channels being broken.

He didn't use True Essence, only employing his body strength, and had already managed to tightly grip the Bells of Mantra in his hand.

DING DING DING

The Bells of Mantra violently shook, struggled, wanting to escape from his grasp, yet, in the end, it couldn't.

Moments later, the Bells of Mantra finally pacified, stilling within his grasp.

Ye Xiao Lian looked at this scene, completely forgetting that she was in a battle and used her hand to cover her mouth, surprised to the extreme.

The Bells of Mantra were given to her by a teacher at Ci Jian Temple

She clearly understood the amount of power contained within the string of bells while it was dancing in the air and that it would be very hard to restrain, she had imagined that Chen Chang Sheng would have many methods to easily stop the Bells of Mantra's effect, but she never would have expected that Chen Chang Sheng will directly use his hand to grip the bells.

The sharp jingling sounds disappeared and the tower became quiet.

Ye Xiao Lian was shocked to the point of being speechless and didn't show any signs of making another move.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't continue either, he continued to hold onto the string of bells and looked towards the second floor.

The room on the second floor was still secluded and serene; unknown as to if it was due to shock from Chen Chang Sheng's display of inhuman strength or some other reason, no one said a word.

Mo Yu had a look of indifference as she said: "Do all you really think he'll humiliate a little girl? It's not like he's Tang Tang."

Those words exposed some sort of hidden intention, and made a decision.

A Li Palace clergy member appeared behind the second floor balustrade, looked at Ye Xiao Lian and asked: "Concede?"

Ye Xiao Lian nodded her head, her eyes a little red.

Chen Chang Sheng placed the Bells of Mantra on the sand near his feet, then turned and headed out of the tower.

He didn't humiliate this girl who had once ridiculed him, nor did he pay her any attention.

Ye Xiao Lian blankly followed his footsteps with her gaze, feeling a little helpless.

Previously, she had already prepared herself to being struck down and then humiliated by Chen Chang Sheng, she never expected that he wouldn't do this.

Leaving the tower, Chen Chang Sheng returned to the woodlands.

Ye Xiao Lian returned to her senior's side, lifting her own sleeve and wiping away her tears.

“Pitying the damsel are we?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at Chen Chang Sheng and gave a sardonic smirk while saying: “What kind of person does that make me?”

Chen Chang Sheng asked in return: “If it was you, what would you do?”

Tang Thirty-Six gave it a thought, finding that he couldn't think of anything he could do.

He didn't like that little girl called Ye Xiao Lian; using callous words was fine, because quarrels relied upon the art of words, spouting nonsense, and shamelessness, but in the end, you

couldn't really give her a beating; wouldn't that just be bullying the weak?

The next one to enter the stage is Luo Luo.

Out of the four scholars from Scholartree Manor that participated in the examination, there only remained two, her opponent was the remaining person after excluding Zhong Hui.

She entered the tower along with the scholar from Scholartree Manor.

Sounds of footsteps could be heard from the second floor.

Some of the personages walked by the window to observe the match. They were all very curious as to what Her Highness' current ability was, to the extent of being able to prompt the Council of Divine Ordinance to update the rankings to the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.

For the first round, the opponent Luo Luo had was too weak, in the second round, Tian Hai Sheng Xue had outright conceded; for this round, will she finally have to fight?

Luo Luo released Rainfall Whip from her side, stared at the scholar from Scholartree Manor and said: "Make the first move."

At Orthodox Academy, towards Chen Chang Sheng, she was polite, respectful, genteel and cute, occasionally acting spoiled; towards others however, her manner was completely different.

At the Ivy League gathering, whether towards Heavenly Academy's instructor or Li Mountain's Elder Xiao Song Gong, they were all looked down upon, let alone at this moment, towards this scholar from Scholartree Manor.

She did not intentionally look down upon him, belittling him, she was only being natural and calm, using an indifferent tone of voice, yet there existed a sort of nobility and might behind it.

The expression of the scholar from Scholartree Manor changed slightly, he slowly drew his longsword from its scabbard.

His movements were very slow, but the sound of his blade leaving its sheath was very piercing.

A sound rung out.

A flash of a blade's edge instantly cut through the distance of 30 odd metres, arriving before Luo Luo's eyes.

Luo Luo didn't even blink; her lashes didn't even flutter.

Rising Flurry.

Rainfall Whip, within her hand, wildly danced.

Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain carried with it boundless True Essence, easily dissipating the blade's gleam, it then struck

towards the scholar opposite.

The Education Palace is a miniature world, the response between Heaven and Earth was especially sensitive, following her usage of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, a phenomenon appeared in the deep blue skies above.

Unknown as to where it came from, a dark cloud enveloped the Tower of Purging Dust.

Then, it began to rain.

As with before the match started, the black eaves of the tower were cleansed once again.

She used Rainfall Whip, the raindrops were its tip.

The raindrops fell upon the eaves and fell upon the sand, letting out a pattering sound.

The same sound as a whip cracking upon a person's body.

The rain increased, becoming a torrential downpour; within the tower, rain blanketed the area, making it no longer possible to see clearly.

Occasionally a blade's gleam would flash out, but would immediately be engulfed by the rainstorm.

Momentarily after, an incredibly sharp sound resonated within the tower.

CRACK

The rainstorm abruptly stopped.

The scholar weakly collapsed in a corner, his entire body covered with wounds, blood and rain pooled together.

His face was deathly pale, his pallid lips softly trembled and his eyes were full of despair.

That was the despair of being crushed by an absolute strength.

Chapter 156 – The Continuous Victories Of Two Youths

The rainstorm stopped and light rays once again descended upon the sand-strewn floor of the tower; channels had been carved out by the rainwater, gazing upon it, it resembled that famous plateau in the Northwest that overlooked the sea.

The scholar from Scholartree Manor was collapsed in a corner, his robe soaked through by blood and rain.

Luo Luo withdrew her whip, quietly standing in her initial position, as if she hadn't raised her hand at all, her nobility self-evident, dominance unmatched.

“Isn't Her Highness... only 14 this year?”

The principal of Star Seizer Academy stood by the window, looking at the scene below, melancholy saying: “This is far too incredible.”

It was indeed incredible, this was not describing how sublime the method used by Luo Luo in this match was, in fact, her method wasn't sublime in the slightest; bluntly speaking, it was a storm, using an absolute strength to directly crush her opponent, extremely simplistic, matching the phrase: a ruler seeks dominion in the midst of chaos.

If Luo Luo was to meet an opponent of the highest level, someone

such as Gou Han Shi, that had already completed their Ethereal Opening, she naturally wouldn't be able to suppress them so forcefully, but against cultivators of the same level, whether in terms of True Essence capacity or purity, and the sheer might in ability to violently expend energy, all of these things made her border upon being undefeatable.

The White Emperor's bloodline talent really was dominating to the extreme – the personages on the floor above were shocked to the point of being speechless, thinking to themselves that the Council of Divine Ordinance's evaluation really was correct. Amongst the younger generation, apart from Xu You Rong and Qiu Shan Jun, whom could both be compared to Her Highness, there were no other bloodline talents that could come close.

Up to this point the Grand Examination had finally begun to enter a zenith, with great matches continuously observed.

After Luo Luo defeated that scholar from Scholartree Manor , came the match between the wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu, and Guan Fei Bai.

This match captured everyone's attention, Chen Chang Sheng was no exception, perhaps being even more attentive towards this match than the other examinees – Tian Hai Sheng Xue had already withdrawn from the tournament, the only person remaining that made him feel cautious and uneasy, that could threaten Luo Luo and bring her harm, was Zhe Xiu.

The tower's door once again closed and the match started.

From the very start, the match between Zhe Xiu and Guan Fei Bai

entered an intense juncture, the tower's silencing array was immediately breached.

The examinees outside of the tower hadn't even sufficiently prepared themselves, yet they already began to hear several sounds, each one clearer than the last.

Some of the examinees with weaker divine senses, immediately had pale faces; they were close to having their sea of consciousness injured by the sounds.

Those resounding noises were not the sound of scuffling, but the sounds of impact, carrying with it some kind of keen essence, they were probably the sound of a blade's edge slicing through the air.

The Southern envoy group had been in the Capital for some time and the four disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect had garnered a huge amount of attention, currently, a lot of people knew that Qi Jian's sword was a much rumoured relic sword from Li Mountain's Hall of Discipline.

The sword Guan Fei Bai used was just a normal sword, worth only 5 taels, at this moment, hearing the piercing sounds of the sword, everyone felt stunned.

To be able to utilise a regular longsword that was only worth 5 taels and have it give off such a clean sword wail, how powerful and intense was Guan Fei Bai's True Essence? What made everyone all the more shocked, was that wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu; he, who didn't use any sort of weapon, what method was he using to go against that terrifying sword?

The sword's wail became increasingly distinct and the Education Palace's world began to have a response between its Heaven and Earth; in the blue skies above, the clouds began to slowly move, constantly shifting in form.

Sometimes akin to rugged cliffs, other times akin to turbid waves crashing upon the shore, in between this, sword manifestations crisscrossed, austere to the extreme; yet, the forms of those clouds couldn't subsist for long, as if winds were billowing across the plains, akin to a pack of wolves howling.

Outside of the tower, it was blanketed by silence, a lot of examinees were shocked to the point of having ashen complexions by the scene they saw and the sounds they heard.

They couldn't imagine, if it were to be themselves inside the tower at this moment, whether facing that sword momentum which crisscrossed into the clouds above or that horrifyingly forlorn and shrill howling wind, what else could they do apart from immediately conceding defeat?

Chen Chang Sheng's expression also became increasingly sombre.

At the Ivy League gathering, Guan Fei Bai had exchanged sword manoeuvres against Luo Luo, though they hadn't utilised True Essence at the time, he could clearly tell that this person's talent is exceptional and that they were extremely earnest in their cultivation, Guan Fei Bai's ability on the path of the sword was also outstanding.

Rumour had it that his ability on the path of the sword was the closest to Qiu Shan Jun's amongst the Divine State's Seven Laws; yet, evidently, he still couldn't suppress his current opponent.

That wolf-tribe youth named Zhe Xiu, his strength actually reached this degree?

After a long period of time, the sword wails slowly disappeared, neither was there howling wind, what followed was the sound of a creak.

The tower's door opened.

Zhe Xiu walked out of the tower, his complexion was pale, expression was cold, and his icy eyes revealed no emotion. Looking upon him, he didn't even seem to resemble a human.

He walked down the stone steps, his movement a little slow, with each raising of his knee seeming to pose a problem.

This caused the others to notice that there was a faint smudge of blood upon his left knee.

Momentarily after, a trickle of blood flowed down from his trouser leg to his ankle.

He didn't wear any shoes, remaining barefooted, allowing that trickle of blood to be clearly seen.

Following this, Guan Fei Bai exited the tower, his posture remained straight, his mildly bleached robe from washing, didn't have any cuts, nor could any blood stains be seen, it actually seemed as if he hadn't sustained any injuries.

Everyone watched him head towards the streambank, feeling a little shocked, thinking, was it possible that Guan Fei Bai had won

so easily?

Zhe Xiu walked to the meadow beyond the crowd and sat down, beginning to regulate his respiration (pranayama), he closed his eyes and ignored the chatter that could be heard from around him.

His sitting posture was slightly strange; he didn't cross his legs, but instead sat upon his ankles, looking very similar to the position of squatting.

At this time, Guan Fei Bai arrived at the streambank, he looked at Gou Han Shi, preparing to say something.

Gou Han Shi shook his head, indicating that Guan Fei Bai shouldn't say anything, he then raised his right hand; his fingers shot out like the wind, pressing down upon Guan Fei Bai's chest three times in lightning-quick succession, conferring vital qi.

Guan Fei Bai's complexion gradually reddened and then turned pale, this change repeated three times, before he finally spat out a mouthful of blood.

This mouthful of blood showered upon several clumps of grass by the streambank, a crackling sound could be heard as the grass withered at a speed noticeable to the eye and then disintegrated.

Uproar. It was at this moment that the examinees finally realised he had suffered such a heavy injury and had only endured it up to this point before it finally unveiled itself.

The blood he had expelled did not contain any poison, it only contained remnants of a distinct manifestation from Zhe Xiu's vigorous True Essence. If Gou Han Shi hadn't assisted in time and that vigorous manifestation had buried itself into Guan Fei Bai's body, it would have severely affected his cultivation. Despite this, his complexion was still pale and sickly to the extreme, akin to having gone through a serious illness.

Thinking of how malicious that wolf-tribe youth's method was, Liang Ban Hu turned his gaze towards that direction, his eyes frosty, Qi Jian was also fuming to the point where his small face was flushed with anger.

Guan Fei Bai wiped away the blood on the edge of his lips and said: "My ability is below others; none can I blame.

Gou Han Shi patted him on the shoulder, an expression of consolation and praise.

At that moment, the Li Palace clergy member appeared atop the stone steps and announced: "Star Seizer Academy, Zhang Ting Tao wins."

Finally, the third round ends.

Outside of the tower, it was quiet, no one cheered and even the sound of discussion was absent.

That's because everyone could already foresee that the duelling would become increasingly more intense, and thus, become increasingly cruel and bloody.

It was under this slightly morose and uncomfortable atmosphere, that the duelling phase's last 16 arose; closely following, were the fourth round's matches.

What no one could have imagined, was that Zhe Xiu would immediately, once again enter the stage and that his opponent would be another young expert from Li Shan Sword Sect, Qi Jian.

Facing two strong opponents in a row, with no time for resting in between matches, though this was the result of lot drawing, it was still rather unfair.

Were it to be a normal examinee, they would perhaps request the examiner for some time to rest, but Zhe Xiu continued to remain silent, his expression indifferent as he entered the Tower of Purging Dust.

Inside the tower, it was very quiet, the battle was already over, Zhe Xiu looked at the sand covered ground before him, feeling as if he had returned to his homeland in the midst of summer.

Beyond Lu Ming (Deer Cry) Hill, there was a river; soybeans and sorghum were planted there, without hunting, it was still possible to fill one's stomach, but no matter how fragrant roasted sorghum was, it still couldn't compare to the scent of meat.

I am a wolf that has come from the North.

A wolf treks miles for meat; this is a principle of nature itself.

Though you are but a child, as long as you're an opponent, I obviously will not hold back; therefore, why are you this angry?

He looked opposite himself, his expressionless face showing emotion for the first time; it was a hard to describe emotion, acutely strange.

Qi Jian stood opposite, his dark hair dispersed during the battle, draping over his shoulders, making him appear even more frail and weak.

Ci Jian Temple's Ye Xiao Lian, Orthodox Academy's Xuan Yuan Po, and himself, they were the three youngest participants in this year's Grand Examination.

His cheeks were very tender and young, at this moment, they were filled with rage,

Zhe Xiu couldn't understand Qi Jian's rage at all, thinking that the moves he had used in the previous close combat might have been a little malicious, but... battles are a matter of life and death, what was wrong with being slightly malicious? Didn't your elders at Li Shan Sword Sect teach you how to battle? Your senior was far more dignified than you are.

Earlier, once he had used those few malicious manoeuvres, Qi Jian had become agitated and incensed for some reason, no longer

cautious as usual.

Qi Jian's True Essence burst out, tens of sword manoeuvres were violently executed, embroiling Zhe Xiu into a melee like a madman, if it wasn't for Zhe Xiu's long years of experiencing life and death, he really would have been on the verge of being hacked to death by Qi Jian's sword.

If Gou Han Shi was to know of his junior brother's performance, he would definitely feel gratified.

Even for a monster such as Zhe Xiu, thinking back to Qi Jian's explosive hurricane of sword manoeuvres, it would leave a slight lingering fear.

At times, rage is indeed a type of power.

It was a pity then, that rage is a type of power that cannot persist for long, Qi Jian's hurricane of sword manoeuvres didn't hack Zhe Xiu to death and Zhe Xiu was the one to obtain final victory.

Leaving the tower, Qi Jian went before Gou Han Shi, his lips slightly pursed, eyes red, the look of someone deeply wronged.

"What happened?" Gou Han Shi's brow flickered, evincing his first display of true anger.

Qi Jian wiped away his tears and said: "Nothing. Senior, you have to take revenge for me."

Gou Han Shi gave a glance towards the faraway Zhe Xiu and said: “I will.”

The wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu, had won two matches in a row, eliminating two people from the Divine State’s Seven Laws, this astounded many people.

But what really astonished everyone was that Chen Chang Sheng once again obtained victory.

In the previous three matches, amongst Chen Chang Sheng’s opponents, the first and third round were too weak, in the second round he had matched up against Scholartree Manor’s Huo Guang. Huo Guang might have been strong, but he wasn’t listed on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, thus, a lot of people couldn’t accurately gauge Chen Chang Sheng’s ability, as for this round, his opponent was a youthful expert that came from Shuang (Frost) City.

That youthful expert from Shuang City was ranked around 20 upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.

Just as everyone thought Chen Chang Sheng’s adventure in the Grand Examination was about to come to an end, he had once again stunned everyone, defeating his opponent.

Everyone had difficulty understanding how he had managed to obtain victory.

Chapter 157 – It'll End At This Point

Due to his betrothal to Xu You Rong, after the Ivy League gathering, Chen Chang Sheng naturally became a popular topic in the Capital; the declaration made for him by His Eminence, The Archbishop, was akin to adding oil onto a fire.

Countless people began to scrutinise everything about him: his age, ancestry; his relationship with the Divine General of the Eastern Decree's estate; his power level; none of these things remained secret and thus, everyone was stunned, wanting to know exactly what had happened to him over these past few days, to make his ability rise in such a spectacular fashion, to the point of being able to win four times in succession at the Grand Examination and enter the final list.

Xuan Yuan Po looked at Chen Chang Sheng, his mouth gaping, as if he was looking at some kind of monster; Tang Thirty-Six stared at him directly in the eyes and asked: "Just exactly what have you eaten? We've been at Orthodox Academy together every day and having meals together, could it be that you've been sneakily making your own meals? Or have you pilfered something good from the Hundred Herb Garden without telling the two of us?"

In that quiet room inside the Tower of Purging Dust, the important figures were also currently in the midst of discussing Chen Chang Sheng's performance for today.

"Could it be that what he just used is the complete version of Discerning Steps?" someone asked, while looking at Xu Shi Ji.

If some older people, those who had experienced that great war

against the demon race, such as Fei Dian or perhaps Jin Yu Lu were to be present, they could have accurately determined what the erratic motion technique used by Chen Chang Sheng was. At the moment, within the room, the only people who might have the knowledge, were Xue Xing Chuan and Xu Shi Ji, two people who had been to the Northern battlefield.

Xu Shi Ji maintained a look of indifference and said: “I haven’t come across any members of the Ye Shi (Discerning) tribe on the frontlines.”

According to reports, for hundreds of years, the majority of people from the Ye Shi tribe in Old Snow City had been drafted by that mysterious Lord Black Robe into an intelligence organisation and would rarely make an appearance.

Xue Xing Chuan’s forces had once captured two spies of the Ye Shi tribe.

The Ye Shi tribe member that had tried to assassinate Her Highness during Spring was currently being held in the Imperial Guard’s prison, thinking back to Chen Chang Sheng’s footwork skill, he shook his head and said: “It’s not the complete version of Discerning Steps, but it has a portion of its substance.”

They all understood his meaning, a portion of the complete Discerning Step’s substance was already enough to display a significant effect in battles at the level of younger people, which the Grand Examination was.

Xue Xing Chuan thought for a while and then continued: “His speed and motion technique are at an apex, combined with suitable luck in the lot drawing, his entry into the last 8 is understandable,

but my opinion is that he won't be able to advance further."

The Grand Examination's top 8 had already been determined, counting young experts that were already famous, such as Gou Han Shi, Zhuang Huan Yu, Zhong Hui and Zhe Xiu.

There were also some surprising entrants, such as one fairly inconspicuous girl from Holy Maiden Peak, and a student from Star Seizer Academy that hadn't received much notice, not even from the Education Board.

The most surprising, was Chen Chang Sheng.

Up to this point, not having been eliminated was already beyond everyone's expectations, seemingly illogical.

"This is too illogical; how hasn't he been eliminated yet?"

The list for the Duelling Stage's top 8 was delivered out of the Education Palace, written upon the mirror in the Hall of Zhao Wen and passed onto the crowd outside of Li Palace.

At this time, it was already approaching twilight, the warm rays of sunset shone upon the stone pillars, landed upon the citizens who had come to join the revelry and landed upon those visitors who had travelled here from afar.

There were currently at least several thousand people thronging outside of Li Palace, it was extremely noisy, the cries of the peddlers had long become hoarse, yet at this time, everyone was

discussing the same topic, displaying the same emotion; that topic was of Chen Chang Sheng winning four matches in a row, that emotion was of shock, bewilderment and anger.

Citizens of the Capital did not like Chen Chang Sheng, but in comparison to the examinees that had come from the South, they did not especially loathe him, the reason for their anger alongside shock at his winning four matches in a row, was purely because his performance had caused them to lose a lot of money, some even had red eyes from their losses.

That's right, apart from first upon the First Banner, there were a lot of other bets for the Grand Examination. There would be winners and losers amongst the examinees in each round, in the same way, after each round, there would be a lot of people from the masses becoming winners or losers.

Due to Chen Chang Sheng, this year, the vast majority of people from the masses were losers.

For each round of the duelling phase, the odds given would be different, this was for the convenience of the masses.

In each round, Chen Chang Sheng's odds would be the lowest, with the biggest pay-out, currently, his odds remained the lowest – today, he had caused some people to be wildly happy, yet caused far more to lose money, however, people still refused to believe he could continue winning.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue sat in a teahouse located South of Li palace, quietly observing the bustle before the palace, he suddenly said: “If the four major gambling venues are still willing to accept, place five thousand taels of gold on Chen Chang Sheng being the final

victor.”

The elderly steward by his side was stunned, hesitantly asking: “Young master, he couldn’t possibly win, could he?”

Tian Hai Sheng Xue said: “In the first round, everyone was of the opinion that he couldn’t possibly win, in the end, he won. In the second round, it remained the same, with no one believing he could win, yet he won, it was the same for the third and fourth round; before the Grand Examination, who could have imagined that he could enter the last 8? As such, why can’t I place a bet on him?”

The elderly steward gave several replies of affirmation.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue suddenly thought of something, saying: “If he really does manage to grasp first place upon the First Banner, take the winnings to repair Orthodox Academy’s main entrance.”

The elder steward thought to himself: “Wasn’t the entrance to Orthodox Academy damaged by young master yourself? Not to mention, the academy hadn’t bothered to repair their entrance and the entire Capital understood what this meant. If you were to repair Orthodox Academy’s entrance for them, wouldn’t this be tantamount to surrendering?”

He was very surprised, but thinking that the young master must have his own purpose for his actions, he didn’t dare to blather, only puzzling over some details.

“If... and I am saying if, if Chen Chang Sheng was really to win, it

would mean a large amount of money, even repairing the front entrance for Orthodox Academy wouldn't require such a large sum."

Tian Hai Sheng Xue gazed at the evening-time Li Palace, replying in a detached tone: "If he really does win, what harm is there in gifting him a gate made from white jade?"

The elderly steward was even more confused, thinking to himself that even if Chen Chang Sheng was to place first upon the First Banner, that youth is Orthodox Academy's flag, a figurehead used by the Orthodoxy's tradition faction to challenge the Divine Empress.

No matter what, the Tian Hai clan could not enlist him to their side, what exactly is your purpose in such actions?

Tian Hai Sheng Xue didn't offer any explanation, he lifted his teacup and took a sip, suddenly feeling that it was rather bland and insipid.

Qiu Shan Jun didn't appear, Mo Yu remained ahead of him; the Grand Examination did indeed cease to hold much meaning for him, but to relinquish it in such a fashion, undoubtedly made his feelings a little complex.

The Divine General of the Eastern Decree's estate, in a drawing room, Madam Xu looked at the middle-aged woman in front her, with her brows lightly knotted and asked: "Granny Hua, are you sure you didn't hear wrong? He really has entered the last 8?"

Granny Hua replied in a low voice: "It should be correct, the four major gambling venues have already hung out their odds for the next round, young master Chen's name is indeed listed upon it."

Madam Xu was speechless, feeling the onset of a headache, if that brat really was to obtain first place upon the First Banner, what should they do?

She looked at the chair and empty tea table in the drawing room, thinking back to the scene in last year's Spring, when she had first met Chen Chang Sheng.

That Taoist youth was reserved and very sanitary.

He hadn't taken a single sip of tea.

Madam Fu felt a sudden palpitation, thinking of a certain possibility.

At a room in the Eastern wing, Shuang'er, who had just received the news, was also startled to the extreme.

She thought back to the scene where she had first met Chen Chang Sheng in the back garden.

She couldn't imagine, that reserved Taoist youth, who had come from the countryside, that trash who couldn't cultivate, he had actually entered the top 8 in the Grand Examination's duelling phase.

According to his rumoured performance at the Ivy League gathering, his results in the academic phase were definitely going to be superb, didn't this mean he was only a step away from entering the Grand Examination's First Banner?

That's right, Chen Chang Sheng only needed to win another around, entering the last four, in combination with his results for the academic phase, he had an extremely high probability of entering the First Banner.

The problem was, could he continue advancing? Or was he only going to make it this far?

There was a small side hall deep within the Imperial Palace, it was extremely cold and lonely, as if it were an isolation palace.

The Black Goat stared at the Chinese olives that were hanging on a tree by the stone steps, remaining indecisive for a long time over whether to eat them or not.

It could clearly remember, that the fruits that youth had fed it in the Hundred Herb Garden previously, were reasonably tasty. It just couldn't determine as to whether if it was the fruit's own flavour, or was it because the fruit had that youth's lingering scent.

Nanny Ning silently walked across its side, saying in a low voice: "Young master Sheng Xue conceded."

The Divine Empress held a piece of scented wood; its edge was currently burning, atop its wisps of scented smoke, a medicinal pill

was suspended in mid-air.

Her fingers slowly shifted the scented wood, the smoke lightly turned in direction, prompting the medicinal pill to slowly spin.

Hearing those words, her fingers stopped, causing the medicinal pill to hang motionless in the air.

Her expression slightly changed, then she came to an understanding, emotionally saying: “A child of Tian Hai is finally showing promise.”

This was something positive, yet also not so positive.

The more promise descendants of the Tian Hai clan had, the harder it was for her to completely let go, the harder it was for the Zhou Dynasty to free itself of that problem.

But she finally felt a little gratified.

Nanny Ning hesitated for a moment before continuing: “Orthodox Academy’s Chen Chang Sheng has entered the last 8.”

The Divine Empress’ brow slowly rose.

Nanny Ning felt rather nervous, she was fond of that child, Chen Chang Sheng, but she was worried about the Divine Empress being displeased.

The Divine Empress didn't say anything.

In the next moment, she appeared within the pitch black underground.

She lightly flicked her sleeve, the thousands of Luminous Pearls in the dome above, lit up.

The cold white rays fell upon the frost covered floor, illuminating everything.

A young girl, garbed in black, with a frosty face was lying prone weakly.

The Divine Empress lightly flicked her finger and that medicinal pill fell by that young girl's body.

"Chen Chang Sheng has yet to be eliminated, your blood seems to retain a little purpose."

That young girl garbed in black, raised her head with much difficulty, stared at the Divine Empress, without any signs of fear, only loathing, and said: "And what type of damnable medicine is this?"

The Divine Empress replied with a calm expression: "Motherwort ointment."

The black-garbed girl knew that a fearsome human such as the Divine Empress would have countless methods to punish her if need be, and wouldn't bother messing with a medicinal pill, she swallowed the medicine without any hesitation.

“Can Chen Chang Sheng obtain first place upon the First Banner?” she looked at the Divine Empress and asked with some curiosity.

“It'll end at this point,” the Divine Empress replied coolly.

In the next moment, she arrived beside the abandoned well at New North Bridge, her hands were held behind her back as she gazed at the myriad of stars in the night sky above. She remained silent for a long period of time, unknown as to what she was pondering.

Chapter 158 – Heavenly Termination; Star Of Solitude

The Education Palace is His Holiness' Green Leaf World. Night and day should also exist within this world, but during the Grand Examination, night and day couldn't be seen, the examinees could only rely upon their senses to estimate the real world's current time.

They didn't know that it was already late at night in the outside world, but weariness came as expected.

Before the fifth round, what came first was a second, supplementary tournament, from numbers 33 to 64, apart from Tian Hai Sheng Xue and a few other examinees who had been heavily injured, and thus, couldn't continue competing, the remaining 20 odd examinees had to expend their last efforts towards their final ranking; but before this, came a period of resting.

The Li Palace clergy distributed food, water and medicine to the examinees, Orthodox Academy had Luo Luo's preparation, and thus, unsurprisingly, had better amenities; the four of them sat by the woodlands, eating and quietly discussing the battles that were to come.

Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po's supplementary tournament didn't have anything worth discussing, the main aim was to help Chen Chang Sheng analyse opponents.

Gou Han Shi displayed serenity and calm, giving others the sense that he was powerful to the point of being undefeatable.

Apart from him, that wolf-tribe youth, Zhe Xiu, was

unquestionably the most dangerous opponent. Even though he had suffered fairly heavy injuries and was exhausted from back-to-back, intense battles against Guan Fei Bai and Qi Jian, he still couldn't be underestimated.

If Chen Chang Sheng wants to take first place upon the First Banner, the two of them were summits he had to transcend.

Thinking of this, Tang Thirty-Six suddenly lost interest, this was because no matter how he thought about it, Chen Chang Sheng couldn't possibly defeat the two of them.

He looked towards the streambank and suddenly said: "Don't all of you think those four from Li Mountain are rather similar to us?"

The four people from Li Shan Sword Sect were at the streambank, eating and chatting, the atmosphere seeming rather pleasant.

At a location far away from the Li Mountain group, Zhe Xiu was also eating.

He was very quiet while eating, his actions were also very slow, making it seem especially serious, as if the ordinary provisions provided by Li Palace were the most exquisite delicacies in the world.

Tang Thirty-Six looked towards that direction, saying, in a slightly sardonic tone: "I'd had thought that wolf-child doesn't

eat.”

Xuan Yuan Po didn't understand, asking: “How can he not eat?”

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “I thought he'd only do things like consume ice, chew dried meat or perhaps drink fresh blood.”

Chen Chang Sheng said: “That would be a monster.”

Tang Thirty-Six asked him in a very serious manner: “Don't tell me none of you feel that he's a monster?”

Xuan Yuan Po gave it a thought, shaking his head saying: “I think it's fine.”

Tang Thirty-Six couldn't be bothered paying him any attention, turned his head and asked: “Chen Chang Sheng, you can't beat him?”

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a little while, replying: “Maybe.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the far off Zhe Xiu and abruptly said: “I suddenly feel an impulse.”

Chen Chang Sheng asked: “What type of impulse?” with much curiosity.

Tang Thirty-Six said: “An impulse to become friends with that wolf-child.”

Chen Chang Sheng stared at him for a long time before confirming that he was being serious. Chen Chang Sheng couldn't stop himself feeling rather alarmed, after giving it a thought, he said: “Looking at him, do you really think he looks like someone that needs friends?”

Before the start of the Grand Examination, outside of Li Palace, it was a sea of people, Zhe Xiu stood by himself and gazed at the dawn; after entering the Hall of Zhao Wen, he directly left the grounds of the academic phase and navigated that sea of trees alone.

He traversed across the emerald river and stood within the pavilion atop the mountain, his back facing the rest of the examinees, solitarily, akin to being motherless; would this type of person need friends?

“Don't tell me none of you think he's very solitary?” asked Tang Thirty-Six as he looked at the other three.

What he said was “solitary”, not “lonely” or “lonesome”, only a “solitary” word that made it distinctly lonelier.

Chen Chang Sheng was stumped, saying: “Anyone can tell, therefore I don't think he needs friends.”

Tang Thirty-Six wiggled his finger, saying: “My thoughts on this are completely opposite to yours, I think for someone as solitary as

him, what they need the most are friends.”

Xuan Yuan Po asked from the side, with much curiosity: “You want to become friends with Zhe Xiu?”

Tang Thirty-Six countered with his own question: “Can’t I?”

Chen Chang Sheng’s gaze fell upon the area beyond the crowd, looking at that wolf-tribe youth who was silently eating with his head held low, after a moment’s silence he said: “I thought you didn’t like people resembling him.”

Tang Thirty-Six’s gaze followed his, landing upon Zhe Xiu, he said: “That’s right, pretending to be lonely and acting despondent are things I used to always do... you all know this, I loathe that past-self, which means I will also dislike someone like him.”

Chen Chang Sheng retracted his gaze, turning it towards Tang Thirty-Six and asked: “Yet you still want to insist upon becoming friends with him?”

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “If he becomes our friend, he wouldn’t be able to be as malicious towards you and Her Highness.”

Xuan Yuan Po couldn’t stop himself from exclaiming: “The elders of my tribe were right, humans... really are bad people.”

“Not humans,” Chen Chang Sheng corrected him and said: “Only a particular human called Tang Tang.”

Tang Thirty-Six couldn't be asked arguing with him, he stood up, patted away loose grass from his rear and said: "There's nothing wrong with trying, he can't possibly just kill me in front of so many people."

Luo Luo hadn't said anything until this moment, she said: "What my tutor said is correct, a solitary person doesn't seem to need friends, at least... Wo Fu Zhe Xiu won't be that type of person."

Chen Chang Sheng gave her a glance, but didn't say anything.

Tang Thirty-Six lifted up half a roast chicken that had hardly been touched from the mat. He also took two sheets of oilpaper and messily wrapped it, then headed towards the area beyond the crowd.

The Orthodox Academy group's discussion didn't catch the attention of others, but his sudden action of leaving the woodlands alongside his direction of travel, which seemed to be heading towards the location of Wo Fu Zhe Xiu, immediately captured everyone's gazes.

The examinees were all very startled, not knowing what he was trying to do; the young girls from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green and Holy Maiden Peak revealed signs of worry on their faces.

For these young girls, no matter how callous Tang Thirty-Six's words were, or how arrogant his actions, he was still a dreamy and genteel nobleman. While Zhe Xiu, no matter how quiet or how

many accolades he had achieved for the human and yao race, he was still a cold-blooded monster that is drenched in blood. Seeing Tang Thirty-Six walk towards Zhe Xiu, naturally made them feel worried.

This world based upon appearances is indeed unfair.

The four from Li Shan Sword Sect who were currently eating and chatting by the streambank were also rather startled. Guan Fei Bai looked at Tang Thirty-Six with a slightly strange expression and asked: “What kind of crazy thing is that person trying to do now?”

At the Ivy League gathering, Tang Thirty-Six had affronted Li Mountain far too deeply, causing him to dislike Tang Thirty-Six intensely.

Qi Jian looked towards the wolf-tribe youth who was located beyond the crowd, his nose lightly wrinkled and his breathing became coarse, evidently fuming.

Gou Han Shi was slightly perplexed, wondering what had happened between his junior brother and Zhe Xiu in their previous battle, to cause him such anger.

The paved area before the Tower of Purging Dust was very broad, with a forest serenely present and a small stream tinkling by; in comparison, the location Zhe Xiu was sitting at had nothing, only a singular smooth rock.

Tang Thirty-Six walked before that rock, looking at Zhe Xiu, whom was kneeling, or perhaps crouching, in that strange position, he suddenly felt a little hesitant.

Zhe Xiu ignored him, quietly eating.

Tang Thirty-Six quietly looked at him, after a period of time, he suddenly said: “If others were to notice the details to your eating habits, they would definitely consider you to be really scary.”

Zhe Xiu took a drink of the fruit juice supplied by Li Palace, then raised his head and looked at Tang Thirty-Six.

Since the start of the Grand Examination, Tang Thirty-Six was the first person to take the initiative and talk to him.

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him and said: “The speed at which you eat is very slow, very mellow, akin to a young lady in her own chambers. Your chewing is very solemn: 12 times for rice, 30 times for beef... it isn’t entertaining, all it proves is that you’re too disciplined towards yourself, or more specifically, you treat yourself very harshly.”

Zhe Xiu quietly stared at him, his eyes didn’t contain any sort of emotion, but neither did he lower his head and continue eating, ending this one-sided conversation.

“Maybe because the snow plains have very little food, or perhaps because there’s a shortage of physicians and medicine, neither are there clergywomen from the Thirteen Divisions of Radiant Green to help treat your wounds; therefore, you’ve been surviving harshly.”

Tang Thirty-Six continued: “You cherish all the food you can obtain and will never wantonly eat and drink in order to avoid physical health problems, in that type of damnable place, even a regular stomach-ache can be tortuous.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “But I won’t think that makes you scary, because I’ve seen someone very similar; that fellow also pays attention to every detail in life, which makes me think, people like you fellows, people who are as afraid of dying as that, they really should acquaint themselves with each other.”

The person he was referring to, was obviously Chen Chang Sheng.

Zhe Xiu’s line of sight followed Tang Thirty-Six’s finger and turned towards the woodlands, after a moment’s silence, Zhe Xiu lowered his head and continued eating, no longer paying him any attention.

Tang Thirty-Six placed the paper package before him and opened it, asking: “Do you need a friend?”

Within the oilpaper there was half a roast chicken; half a chicken will only have one chicken leg, this had already been taken by Chen Chang Sheng for Luo Luo, leaving the chicken somewhat incomplete, it had also been left for a while, making it rather cold, its fat congealed on the surface of its skin, giving it a slightly unpleasant look; more importantly, roast chicken really isn’t a healthy food.

Yet, unknown as to why, upon seeing the roast chicken, Zhe Xiu actually opened his mouth and spoke.

From the start of the Grand Examination, he had only spoken two sentences, which weren't heard by most people, no one knew how his voice sounded.

It wasn't until this moment, did Tang Thirty-Six come to know that his voice wasn't coarse and grating, sharing no similarities to the rumoured wolf howl.

Zhe Xiu's voice was chilly, the speed was very slow, with a rather long gap between each word, akin to a child that had only just learnt how to talk, or a mute person that had suddenly gained the ability of speech.

He looked at Tang Thirty-Six with an expressionless face and said, in an exceedingly slow manner: "My fate foments heavenly termination and the star of seclusion, destined to a life of solitude; therefore, I don't have any friends."

The heavens above have countless stars, perhaps there is a star that is located far away from the sea of stars, in a place that is easily neglected, lonely to the extreme.

Perhaps that star really was named Heavenly Termination.

Perhaps the Fated Star illuminated by Zhe Xiu, really was that secluded Heavenly Termination.

But regardless of whether if it was true or not, the cold and detached intent behind his words were very clear, he didn't need friends, he wanted to keep everyone at a distance.

For most people, they would perhaps know to back away from this type of situation.

But Tang Tang wasn't your average person, he was a windbag.

After coming to know Chen Chang Sheng, and especially after formally entering Orthodox Academy, his hidden character had finally found release.

“Not having friends doesn't mean not needing friends, what do you think about me?”

He looked at Zhe Xiu, asking sincerely.

Chapter 159 – So Be It

Even someone like Zhe Xiu, with a fate that foments heavenly termination and the star of solitude, was shaken by Tang Thirty-Six's sincere attitude.

He looked at Tang Thirty-Six, wanting to say something, yet didn't.

But his look made Tang Thirty-Six feel a little hurt; that's because when Tang Thirty-Six used to see Zhuang Huan Yu or other fellow-students from Heavenly Academy, their look would be more or less the same – he was very certain, that was the look they used when seeing an idiot.

“If you think I'm not suitable, then how about Chen Chang Sheng? I've already told you, that fellow is very similar to you, he's also afraid of death, being especially fussy when eating; you chew 12 times for rice? He's a freak that needs to chew 20 times. Within the boundless sea of people, being able to find someone so similar to yourself isn't easy; isn't that something worth cherishing?”

Tang Thirty-Six excitedly waved his arms as he spoke.

Zhe Xiu remained unresponsive, continuing to eat the provisions that had been provided by Li Palace.

Tang Thirty-Six felt a little forlorn, pointed at the hulking yao youth that was by the woodlands and said: “If you feel that humans aren't trustworthy, then I strongly endorse Xuan Yuan Po; honest and sincere, a first-class person.”

Zhe Xiu continued to ignore him.

“You’re just forcing me to use the most powerful item here.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “Your reputation isn’t low; having Her Highness become your friend can be considered well-matched.”

“How about it? I trust you won’t be able to find a better choice of friend, both of you are human yaos (human freaks), no, no, yao humans, with the same life experiences and having met similar problems, upon becoming friends, it’s quite possible you can acquire many benefits from Her Highness; at least, when coming across complications, you can discuss them together, no?”

At this moment, he no longer displayed any signs of being relaxed and transcendent, the traits befitting of a young master from Wen Shui; he was completely the picture of some talented merchant peddling his goods.

Upon hearing the name, Her Highness, Luo Luo, Zhe Xiu finally raised his head once again, looking towards the woodlands, his gaze revealed a complex mood, unknown as to what he was thinking.

As Tang Thirty-Six thought he was on the verge of being successful, Zhe Xiu replied, in a slow, halting manner: “I don’t need friends, only a loner can become strong.”

Hearing those words, Tang Thirty-Six didn't become angry, instead, he settled his mind, and calmed himself, becoming more solemn.

He stared right into Zhe Xiu's eyes and said: "Wolves have never, contrary to what people think, been loners."

Zhe Xiu returned the stare, a sharp gaze lightly evident.

Tang Thirty-Six continued calmly: "The reason why you're lonely, is because you're not accepted by your tribe."

Zhe Xiu's gaze immediately became cold, akin to a blade that had frozen over.

Tang Thirty-Six acted as if he didn't notice, and said: "The wolf tribe usually battles as a pack, no? Upon knowing who you are, a lot of examinees were conjecturing as to why you would leave the snow plains, travelling countless miles to the Capital and entering the Grand Examination."

He continued: "Chen Chang Sheng thinks it's because you can't accept being taken down from second position on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds by Her Highness and thus, you want to defeat Her Highness in the examination in order to prove yourself."

Hearing these words, Zhe Xiu frowned, seemingly surprised with Orthodox Academy's wariness against himself.

Tang Thirty-Six continued: "Before Su Mo Yu was injured by

you, he had said that he believes you simply enjoy battling and that the examination gives you this opportunity.”

Zhe Xiu looked at Tang Thirty-Six and asked: “What... do you think?”

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “Chen Chang Sheng’s concern is fairly logical, but not enough, otherwise, two years ago, you would have long fought your way to Holy Maiden Peak, seeking to cause trouble for Xu You Rong.”

Zhe Xiu shook his head and said: “I can’t defeat Her.”

Tang Thirty-Six was bewildered, discontinuing this line of discourse; he continued talking: “I don’t believe Su Mo Yu’s reasoning to be correct. Even if you enjoy battling and wish to improve yourself in the midst of battle, it will have to be the type of battle where life and death is decided; for you, the Grand Examination shouldn’t be any different from a game; how much appeal can it have?”

Zhe Xiu used silence to convey his agreement.

“Then what exactly do you want? What is your purpose for coming to participate in the Grand Examination?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him and said: “Tell me, perhaps I can help you.”

“I... don’t need friends.”

Zhe Xiu’s manner of speaking remained extremely slow causing his speech to feel a little painful for those hearing it. He looked at Tang Thirty-Six straight in the eyes and enunciated each word clearly, saying: “I need... money.”

It was still and calm, a breeze passed by the oilpaper’s edges and caused it to flutter, letting off a small sound, the roast chicken’s oily scent became dampened somewhat.

Tang Thirty-Six didn’t say anything for a long while, because he was dumbfounded.

Leaving the woodlands and coming over to converse with Zhe Xiu, he had naturally prepared himself mentally; no matter what Zhe Xiu wanted, no matter how strange, he wouldn’t feel surprised and would be willing to procure it.

Chen Chang Sheng wanting to obtain first upon the First Banner would require Zhe Xiu’s assistance, for this, even a bigger cost would still be worthwhile for Orthodox Academy.

But he never could have guessed Zhe Xiu would want money.

Within the younger generation of the continent, Zhe Xiu was unquestionably the haughtiest and most solitary youth, yet, what he wanted, was the basest thing in the world.

Tang Thirty-Six spent a long time confirming that Zhe Xiu

wasn't joking and that his words were what he truly wanted, this made Tang Thirty-Six all the more shocked.

“Money?”

“Yes, I need money, a lot of money.”

“What for?”

Zhe Xiu didn't answer.

A light breeze fluttered the oilpaper; the roast chicken slowly became cold.

Tang Thirty-Six also cooled-down, he looked at Zhe Xiu and said: “I'm very rich.”

Zhe Xiu answered: “I know.”

Tang Thirty-Six asked: “Amount?”

Zhe Xiu said: “Depends on situation.”

After a moment's silence, Tang Thirty-Six said: “Deal.”

Zhe Xiu looked at him, saying in an indifferent manner: “I also want one more thing, I hope you can give it to me.”

Tang Thirty-Six lightly frowned, asking: “We have that thing you want?”

Zhe Xiu answered: “Yes.”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him in the eyes and said: “So... your objective from the start, in participating, was Orthodox Academy?”

Zhe Xiu said: “Yes.”

Tang Thirty-Six asked: “Is it Her Highness or is it someone else?”

Zhe Xiu said: “It isn’t you.”

Tang Thirty-Six understood, Zhe Xiu had come for Chen Chang Sheng.

Tang Thirty-Six gave it a thought and then said: “He really wants to obtain first upon the First Banner, so I would think, as long as you don’t want his life, he would be willing to give you anything else.”

Zhe Xiu said: “I don’t want his life.”

Tang Thirty-Six nodded, saying: “Then that’s fine. Once the lot drawing results are out, we will discuss what to do.”

Zhe Xiu didn't answer, instead asking: "Can I eat it?"

His gaze fell upon the roast chicken.

Returning to the woodlands, upon seeing Chen Chang Sheng and the other's gazes, Tang Thirty-Six didn't care about saying anything first, he picked up the teapot and poured himself three cups of warm tea in succession.

It was at this moment that Chen Chang Sheng noticed his back was drenched in sweat and that his forehead was also covered with beads of sweat. Chen Chang Sheng hurriedly took out a handkerchief from his sleeve and passed it to Tang Thirty-Six, then asked: "What happened?"

Zhe Xiu was famous for being cold-blooded and ruthless, but of what temperament was Tang Thirty-Six? He couldn't possibly be intimidated to this state.

"I was frightened," Tang Thirty-Six used the handkerchief to wipe away the sweat on his face, he then looked at everyone else, his face displayed a lingering fear.

Chen Chang Sheng was a little speechless, thinking to himself, "what did Zhe Xiu do, to the point of being able to scare you?"

"I'd have never considered it, that the wolf-child could be... a money-grubber"

Tang Thirty-Six looked at all of them while talking, placing additional emphasis on “money-grubber”.

Ignoring just money, it was the love of money.

“How can that be?”

Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po both spoke at the same time, they came from the yao domain, where there were a lot of rumours about Zhe Xiu, they couldn't bring themselves to believe what Tang Thirty-Six said.

“He really just wants money.”

Tang Thirty-Six was slightly annoyed, saying: “If you don't believe me, then just wait a while and you'll see.”

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a bit, then asked: “Apart from money, does he want anything else?”

“Yes, he wants something from you,” replied Tang Thirty-Six.

“You agreed to it?” not knowing why, Chen Chang Sheng felt a little anxious.

Tang Thirty-Six replied in a matter of course manner: “It's not as if he wants your life, why wouldn't I agree? I don't think this type of opportunity will appear twice.”

Chen Chang Sheng felt a little powerless, saying: “You don’t even know what he wants, how could you promise him in my place?”

Tang Thirty-Six countered with his own question: “Do you want to take first place upon the First Banner?”

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t even need to consider his reply: “It’s not want to, it’s have to.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “If that wolf-child doesn’t help, what do you think your chances will be?”

Chen Chang Sheng glanced towards the streambank, Gou Han Shi was currently talking to his junior disciples, perhaps discussing the previous matches between Guan Fei Bai, Qi Jian and Zhe Xiu. Judging from Gou Han Shi’s face, he was probably giving guidance to Guan Fei Bai and Qi Jian and wasn’t trying to glean anything from their battles.

He looked at Tang Thirty-Six, answering in a slightly uncertain tone: “30 percent?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him and snorted: “Can you get any more shameless?”

“Be a little more respectful towards my tutor,” said Luo Luo, rather displeased, she then turned towards Chen Chang Sheng and said, in a rather worried voice: “30 percent... is that a little too

generous?”

Tang Thirty-Six laughed uproariously, arousing the attention of many examinees.

Chen Chang Sheng spread out his hands and said: “Fine, if I were to match against Gou Han Shi right now, I don’t see any chances for myself.”

Luo Luo said: “If I can draw him in the need round, Sir’s chances might be slightly higher.”

Tang Thirty-Six shook his head and said: “Zhe Xiu must also battle against him in a match, only then can there be a chance.”

Chen Chang Sheng asked: “Yet, the drawings won’t necessarily match our plans.”

“It doesn’t matter if Zhe Xiu draws someone else, currently, he’s the same as Her Highness, in charge of helping you sweep away opponents.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “Her Highness and Zhe Xiu are the door gods for you taking first place.”

Upon hearing the words, “door gods”, Chen Chang Sheng thought of the dark underground space, thought of the two legendary Divine Generals that were depicted upon the stone wall and the Black Dragon that was bounded by metal chains; he

suddenly felt rather anxious.

“Isn’t it rather inappropriate to have your mind wander at a moment like this?” said Tang Thirty-Six, rather angrily.

Chen Chang Sheng said: “Continue.”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “What I want to say is, for the opportunity to change Zhe Xiu from being the most dangerous enemy into being the biggest aide, any price is worth paying.”

Chen Chang Sheng thought for a while, then said: “You’re right.”

Tang Thirty-Six continued: “Therefore you should thank me. Not just anyone can persuade that wolf-child, conversing with him is very strenuous and tiring.”

“Thank you,” said Chen Chang Sheng.

“Aren’t all of you thinking too much?” Xuan Yuan Po looked at all of them while saying: “You have to defeat your own opponent first, it might be Zhuang Huan Yu, it might be Zhong Hui, it may even be Gou Han Shi you meet in the next round. If you can’t win, even if Zhe Xiu really is willing to help, it won’t matter for us.”

The woodlands were dead silent.

Tang Thirty-Six was slightly annoyed, saying: “A child that is

overly honest, will easily cause others to get angry over their words.”

“That’s because an honest child speaks the truth,” said Xuan Yuan Po in a slightly defiant manner.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the location far beyond the crowd, Zhe Xiu was currently on top of the rock, quietly eating the roast chicken.

“So be it, let’s wait for the results to the drawing of lots before we continue this discussion... additionally, next time, get him an entire chicken to eat, he looks strangely pitiful.”

Chapter 160 – A Simple Sword

What did Zhe Xiu really want? That was a question that Chen Chang Sheng really wanted to answer. Looking back, he was certain that when they entered the Education Palace, Zhe Xiu turned and took a single glance at Luo Luo. Because of that glance, he had thought that this wolf tribe youth was exceptionally dangerous. Thus, who could have guessed that Tang Thirty-Six would take a single roasted chicken, and somehow bribe him into helping Orthodox Academy?

This seemed utterly absurd, but it really happened.

Luo Luo was also looking at Zhe Xiu with a somewhat complex expression.

For most of the younger cultivators, the Grand Examination was the most important event in their life. However, for certain people, the exams were just an opportunity to exchange for something else that they really wanted. Putting it in other words, the seemingly sacred Grand Examinations was, in reality, just something akin to a giant auction.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue withdrawing from the tournament, and Zhe Xiu agreeing to Orthodox Academy's deal, was all because of this reason. So what about Chen Chang Sheng? Luo Luo knew that he wasn't interested in fame – so why was he so adamant about taking first place in the examinations? She had asked him about this in the past, as did Tang Thirty-Six, but Chen Chang Sheng had never given an answer to this question.

The second tournament had few surprises. Tang Thirty-Six easily defeated his opponent, and Xuan Yuan Po's luck was rather good – he didn't fight any of the stronger cultivators on the Proclamation of the Azure Clouds, and thus also easily won his match. Adding their results on the academic and martial phases, it's uncertain if Xuan Yuan Po can make it to the Three Grades, but for Tang Thirty-Six, it should not be a problem.

The matches between the final eight was determined by drawing lots, as usual. However, because there were so few competitors remaining, the lots were divided into two blocks, and the results determined all of a competitor's fights for the remainder of the exam.

The results of the drawing was that Luo Luo was matched against the young scholar from Scholartree Manor, Zhong Hui. Chen Chang Sheng's opponent was Zhuang Huan Yu. Guo Han Shi's opponent was the young woman from the Holy Maiden Sect, and Zhe Xiu's was to fight against the student from Star Seizer Academy. The four matches had two fights between allies – Li Shan Sword Sect and Holy Maiden Peak were of the same school, and Zhe Xiu used Star Seizer Academy's name to attend the competition.

This did not match Tang Thirty-Six's plan.

In his view, the best result for the first half would be for Zhe Xiu to be matched against Guo Han Shi, and for Luo Luo to fight against Zhuang Huan Yu. The best result for the second half would be Zhong Hui versus that student from Star Seizer Academy, and for Chen Chang Sheng to be matched against that woman from the

Holy Maiden Sect. That way, even if Guo Han Shi defeated Zhe Xiu, he would have to fight against Luo Luo – after two difficult matches, even someone like Guo Han Shi would be exhausted. On the other hand, Chen Chang Sheng's defenses were great. In a competition, he would likely defeat the woman from the Holy Maiden Sect, so if he could follow this by defeating Zhong Hui, he might actually have a chance to win first place.

But now, Guo Han Shi only needed to defeat Zhe Xiu to enter the final match, as the woman from the Holy Maiden sect was obviously no match for him. Of course, this kind of draw had its own benefits – Chen Chang Sheng would only need to defeat Zhuang Huan Yu to enter the final competition. After all, Luo Luo should easily be able to defeat Zhong Hui, and in her next match against Chen Chang Sheng, she would likely just forfeit.

The first match in the bracket was Chen Chang Sheng against Zhuang Huan Yu.

During the exams, Zhuang Huan Yu was, like Tian Hai Sheng Xue, a bit silent and subdued. The only difference was that Tian Hai Sheng Xue's expression was because he was preparing himself to forfeit the competition. Zhuang Huan Yu's gloom was because he wanted to go further in the world, but the opponents in his prior competition were too weak for him to show how much he had improved.

Zhuang Huan Yu was one of the celebrated geniuses among the youths of his generation. Placing eleventh on the Proclamation of the Azure Clouds, he was the highest ranking student amongst all of the Ivy League students of his generation. He was the pride of Heavenly Academy – aside from the top three, the highest ranks of the Proclamation of Azure Clouds had little difference in their

ability, so he was easily the strongest opponent that Chen Chang Sheng had faced during the Grand Exams.

The Tower of Purging Dust was silent.

Zhuang Huan Yu looks at Chen Chang Sheng emotionlessly and said, “Your luck today was quite good.”

From the first round of the competition until now, Chen Chang Sheng’s strongest opponents were Huo Guang and that young man from Shuang City, who was ranked around 20 on the proclamation. Both seemed quite powerful, but there were many really stronger opponents in the examinations. He did not have to fight against anyone from Li Mountain, and didn’t meet anyone like Zhe Xiu. Statistically speaking, his luck was definitely rather good.

“Your luck was also quite good,” Chen Chang Sheng looked at him and responded.

This was also true. From the beginning of the dueling phase, Zhuang Huan Yu didn’t meet anyone that remotely matched his level. In terms of just luck, no one – Chen Chang Sheng included – could compare with him. This was already something beyond just luck; it was apparent that someone from within the Orthodoxy had somehow rigged the drawings in his favor.

Heavenly Academy was the most prestigious academy under the Orthodoxy. Regardless of Principal Mao Qiu Yu’s or Vice Principal Zhuang’s actual wishes, the Orthodoxy must have at least one

exceptional student that can represent them in the exams. Especially now that Orthodox Academy was showing the faint signs of revival, the Orthodoxy naturally would not permit Heavenly Academy's prestige to be completely taken away.

“If two people with great luck meet, then in my opinion, they should no longer be able to rely on luck,” Zhuang Huan Yu looked at him and said.

If one can no longer rely on luck, then naturally, he can only rely on true strength.

At this time, the Li Palace clergyman officiating the match asked, “ready?”

Zhuang Huan Yu nodded his head.

Chen Chang Sheng, however, shook his head, and did something that no one else could expect.

He walked under the eaves of the tower, unstrapped and removed his shoes, and placed them at the bottom of the stone steps. The shoes were arranged very neatly, as if he was a guest at someone else's mansion.

Chen Chang Sheng walked back into the arena with his feet bare, the soles of his feet carrying a trace of yellow sand.

He raised his right hand, and grabbed the hilt of the short-sword

strapped to his waist.

With this movement, the Tower of Purging Dust became quiet. The important people on the second floor did not speak, though their gazes became brighter and their spirits became more dignified.

Even when he won against young man from Shuang City from the previous match, Chen Chang Sheng did not draw his sword. He primarily used the strange and unpredictable movements of the Discerning Steps, and ultimately relied on his speed and strength. From what they can see, however, he was already preparing to draw his sword during this match. It seems that, facing someone as strong as Zhuang Huan Yu, he could no longer afford to conceal any of his abilities.

Still, no one believed that he could actually defeat Zhuang Huan Yu. Even though he displayed unimaginable strength and speed in his prior battles, as well as the mysterious Discerning Steps, but he has only successfully cultivated for a short time. His True Essence reserves should be much lower than a truly strong cultivator, so it was impossible to see how he could win.

The most fundamental reason was that Zhuang Huan Yu was truly very powerful.

“Are those wearing shoes supposed to be afraid of those who are barefoot?” Zhuang Huan Yu stared at Chen Chang Sheng’s sand-stained feet, and continued after a brief pause. “Perhaps you did not know, but when I was still living in the rural areas a long time ago, I also had very few opportunities to wear shoes, let alone new ones.”

Chen Chang Sheng was silent, although he understood what Zhuang Huan Yu had meant.

Zhuang Huan Yu was the son of the vice principal of Heavenly Academy, but had to take care of his sick mother out in the countryside. As such, he endured for many years before finally obtaining success after much difficulty and becoming the pride of Heavenly Academy.

Even now, he was wearing a pair of simple cloth shoes.

Still, Chen Chang Sheng did not entirely understand why Zhuang Huan Yu looked at him with such cold eyes, full of hidden hostility. He could not remember when he had offended this person.

Zhuang Huan Yu was the future that was nurtured by Heavenly Academy. For him to oppose Orthodox Academy was a logical response. As for his old grudge against Tang Thirty-Six, it's likely similar to that of Guan Fei Bai: a grudge that a person who had lived a life of poverty would hold against a wealthy scion who never had to worry about life. Still, why would this person hate Chen Chang Sheng specifically?

“Shall we begin?” he asked.

His words are very customary, as if he's standing in the classrooms of Heavenly Academy, and asking whether classes can start in front of his fellow students.

Chen Chang Sheng's response was also very ordinary. He simply nodded his head.

Zhuang Huan Yu raised his scabbard, wielding it with his left hand while his right hand gripped the hilt of his sword. He silently looked at his opponent and spoke one word. "Please."

Chen Chang Sheng gripped his short-sword with his right hand. His left hand extended before him, and he answered, "Please."

Thus, the match began in such an ordinary fashion, though even from the start, it was anything but an ordinary match.

With a single ring of the bell, Zhuang Huan Yu drew his sword and swung it seemingly freely.

Though it seems like a casual swing, in reality, this technique was extremely focused. The blade sliced apart the air, leaving only a line that was as straight as a pen, flawlessly parallel to the ground.

Not all techniques can create a line this straight.

Zhuang Huan Yu's sword, cut in a straight line.

About thirty metres away from him, an arc appeared.

It was a semicircular arc of brilliant light.

The light arc did not appear in the air, nor did it appear on the sand-laden floor. Instead, it appeared directly within Chen Chang Sheng's eyes.

Chen Chang Sheng's eyes are very bright, and his pupils are very dark. They weren't dark like the deep colors of the night, but a somehow purer sort of darkness.

A sudden arc of light appearing within these dark pupils were very easy to see.

This was because the line from Zhuang Huan Yu's sword broke through the air and, in a flash, closed the distance, appearing before Chen Chang Sheng's body.

The light from this technique was less than three feet (a metre) from his eyes.

The sword light arrived too quickly, though there was a bit of delay on the two ends. The straight line created by the sword thus became an arc when it finally arrived before Chen Chang Sheng. This arc of light was flawless; as it was extremely sturdy, it was difficult for Chen Chang Sheng to simply break. In addition, no matter how he decides to parry the arc of light, the remaining parts of the arc would rapidly converge and become a complete circle, trapping his body within.

This match, with its very ordinary beginning, was extraordinary even during the start.

Zhuang Huan Yu's first technique was Heavenly Academy's strongest sword technique, the Sword of Hithering Light.

Countless inaudible praise emerged from the second floor of the tower.

It seemed like a very simple attack, but it was apparent that Zhuang Huan Zu's cultivation was not so simple.

Even considering all of the techniques used in the entire examinations, this attack could rank in the top three.

How would Chen Chang Sheng counter this technique?

Chapter 161 – Eyes Closed And Unseeing; A Hundred Blades Arise

Sand rose from the ground, akin to an explosion, Chen Chang Sheng suddenly disappeared from sight.

Only a single striking sound could be heard and a distinct sword mark appeared on the wall.

Chen Chang Sheng's figure reappeared, his position was around 7 metres away from his original position. It was impossible to discern how he had arrived at that location.

He used the edge of his vision for a single glance, seeing that the sword mark left upon the wall was about an inch deep, faintly showing the pale stone within.

This is His Holiness' Green Leaf World, within a constructed reality, structures here are extraordinarily robust, not to mention, a defensive array was being used in the Tower of Purging Dust. The seemingly casual sword manoeuvre used by Zhuang Huan Yu had actually managed to leave such a deep scar upon the stone wall, it didn't take much to imagine the amount of damage it would have done if it had landed on Chen Chang Sheng.

Even if his body's physical defence was unbelievably high, it couldn't possibly withstand that move directly.

Luckily, he had never thought of neutralising or blocking that

sword manoeuvre, from the start, his intention was to avoid it.

At the moment the blade was drawn by Zhuang Huan Yu, Chen Chang Sheng moved; as the imposing sword flash reflected in his eyes, his right leg had already stepped onto the sandy floor, instantaneously moving.

If the sand-strewn floor could accurately mirror the real world's night sky, then his initial position would have been the location of the Three Stars Mansion in the Southwestern direction and his current position would be the location of the Neck Mansion in the Southeastern direction.

He cast the sand as a blizzard, borrowing a blizzard's form and traversing the Twenty-Eight Mansions of the constellations above; his motion technique was erratic and unpredictable; this, was Discerning Steps.

“So that's Discerning Steps?” said Zhuang Huan Yu, while looking at him calmly, not feeling surprised at his dodging of the sword flash, it was evident that Chen Chang Sheng's performances in the previous rounds were all known to him.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't say anything, his right hand continued to firmly grip onto his sword's hilt, his gaze was slightly low, resting upon Zhuang Huan Yu's sword bearing right hand.

Zhuang Huan Yu took a step forward, holding out his sword horizontally, his manner was extremely relaxed.

Chen Chang Sheng could clearly see his right hand, which held his blade, gently tighten, the nails turning pale; all signs of impending motion.

Several lines of sword flashes, silently, without indication, cut across a distance of 30 odd metres, arriving in front of him.

Chen Chang Sheng once again moved before the sword flashes arrived, his divine sense focused to a thread, his figure suddenly accelerating. It seemed as if he had taken two steps to the West, yet in the midst of the transition, he had arrived at the rear.

It was still Discerning Steps, this time, he had followed the Southeastern path of the Seventh Mansion.

BANG BANG BANG BANG

Several sharp sounds of cutting could be heard erupting from the wall behind him towards the right.

Fragments of stone clattered onto the ground, four distinct sword marks appeared; swift and powerful to the extreme.

Zhuang Huan Yu's expression remained calm, he stepped forwards once more, shortening the distance between him and Chen Chang Sheng by another step.

Chen Chang Sheng stared at Zhuang Huan Yu's right hand with stern concentration.

Zhuang Huan Yu's blade was too swift, too fierce, the battle had only just begun and he had only wielded his blade twice, yet Chen Chang Sheng was already feeling heavily pressured.

A faint sound of praise could be heard drifting down from the second floor.

It was praise for Zhuang Huan Yu.

In the previous rounds of the duelling, Zhuang Huan Yu didn't meet any strong opponents and had very ordinary performances, not displaying any traits worthy of being the representative of the Capital's younger generation, this led to him actually being somewhat overlooked.

However, he had beaten Qi Jian in the past, but then chose to peacefully cultivate at Heavenly Academy, this caused his ranking to remain around tenth on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds. The reason for this was because his aim is Qiu Shan Jun and Qiu Shan Jun was no longer on the Proclamation of Azure Clouds. The truth is, he considered himself strong enough to rank within the top 3 on the proclamation; even if he was to go against Zhe Xiu, he wouldn't feel any fear.

The pride of Heavenly Academy naturally had the qualifications to be proud.

Such a proud and youthful expert, facing against Chen Chang Sheng, had actually used Heavenly Academy's supreme skill,

proving that he looked upon Chen Chang Sheng highly and that he didn't want to give Chen Chang Sheng any chance.

Chen Chang Sheng's motion technique was too fast, too erratic and unpredictable, if he had an attack to pair with his motion technique, he might really prove a threat towards Zhuang Huan Yu.

Therefore, Zhuang Huan Yu didn't give him any chance for an attack, directly relying upon swift and fierce sword manifestations, restraining him to an area near the wall.

This was being overpowered by a difference in levels and power, where the strong have an absolute advantage, similar to how Luo Luo had previously crushed that scholar from Scholartree Manor.

The sword was once again wielded, multiple sword flashes once again cut through the air.

Shrill sounds of the air being broken continuously resounded.

Within the tower, golden sand slowly rose.

Sword flashes constantly swept by, akin to flashes of lightning.

Sword marks continuously appeared upon the wall, distinct and deep; as if artisans were currently carving calligraphy upon its surface.

Innumerable footprints appeared upon the sand, some in the West, some towards the East, without any sort of discernible pattern between them.

A whistling sound went by.

Chen Chang Sheng appeared in a location close by the wall, his right shoulder had a light wound.

Tens of sword flashes successively arrived, he had narrowly avoided most of them, but while transitioning from between the Willow and Well Mansions in the Southwest to the Bond Mansion in the Northwest, his True Essence flow stuttered, slowing him for an instant, allowing the sword flash to catch up.

Zhuang Huan Yu pointed his sword towards the floor, appearing especially dignified.

In comparison, Chen Chang Sheng's upper clothing was covered with sand, which, coupled with his wound, no matter how small it was, combined to make him look a little haggard.

Yet his expression remained calm, he stared intently at Zhuang Huan Yu's right hand, incredibly focused.

The Sword of Hithering Light is Heavenly Academy's supreme skill, extremely taxing on True Essence; for something on the level of Discerning Steps, its True Essence consumption, unsurprisingly,

was also high.

The reason why Zhuang Huan Yu was so confident, relying upon his sword arts to directly suppress Chen Chang Sheng, was because he trained diligently, had a high talent and his Fated Star was located far away.

Amongst those of the same generation, his True Essence capacity could be considered a pinnacle, even with such depletion, he could completely wear out Chen Chang Sheng and Chen Chang Sheng would not have any method of changing this situation.

“So it’s only to this degree?” he looked at Chen Chang Sheng while asking, his expression serious, without any hint of ridicule. His mildly weary brows revealed disappointment.

In order to prepare for the Grand Examination, from the start of the Ivy League gathering, he had trained incessantly, preparing for today’s match, even though Chen Chang Sheng’s performance could be considered superb it still made him feel disappointed.

Chen Chang Sheng was breathing rather heavily, with his successive use of Discerning Steps and the pushing of his speed to its maximum, the True Essence in his body that was already deficient, was currently near spent.

Due to his calculations of star positions and footwork, his divine sense had become exhausted, the most troubling thing was, Zhuang Huan Yu’s blade was too swift and fierce, though he could narrowly dodge it, he couldn’t attack his opponent; this would eventually lead to a defeat.

He didn’t want to lose, he absolutely needed to attack.

At the same time Zhuang Huan Yu said those words, Chen Chang Sheng's right leg once again stepped onto the sand before himself, but this time, he didn't make use of Discerning Steps, concentrating as much power as he could into his step.

That terrifying strength he had bizarrely acquired after meeting the Black Dragon that night, instantly caused the ground to fissure under his foot, his body became a blur and whistled out.

A loud cracking sound erupted; Zhuang Huan Yu's blade silently struck out, but the sword flash cutting through the air gave off a clean reverberation.

At this moment, Chen Chang Sheng's speed was fast beyond imagination, it could be seen that he was on the verge of colliding with the sword flash, but suddenly, he disappeared.

He had actually concealed the motion technique of Discerning Steps within his charge.

Within the sand, his figure flickered by, in an instant, Chen Chang Sheng had arrived before Zhuang Huan Yu.

This was the first time he had gotten so close to Zhuang Huan Yu, close enough for him to finally make an attack against his opponent.

His left hand held onto the scabbard, while his right grasped onto the sword hilt, on the verge of drawing the blade.

It was at this moment, Zhuang Huan Yu's arrow like brows twitched upwards, his eyes revealing signs of pity, a single fist struck out explosively.

Zhuang Huan Yu's right hand held onto his sword, while his left was by his side, alas, it had actually been steadily amassing True Essence.

A seemingly casual punch, but it had actually been storing power for an exceedingly long time.

A loud ringing sound rung out, akin to a bell strike.

A powerful force followed his punch and billowed outwards, shockwaves in the air spread out in all directions.

Chen Chang Sheng was sent flying, spinning in the air multiple times, akin to a hurtling boulder, landing upon the ground at some distance away.

A loud cracking sound could be heard and he heavily landed upon the floor, but it wasn't falling, as his bare feet were the first to touch upon the ground, landing upon the sand; half crouched upon his knees, stably staying in place.

The short-sword was held out horizontally in front his eyes, it was this blade that blocked the punch Zhuang Huan Yu had been preparing for so long.

His hands that were holding onto the short sword lightly trembled, though his strength was great, against a strike that was imbued with such an abundant amount of True Essence, it was still rather damaging.

“So it’s only to this degree?”

Zhuang Huan Yu headed towards him, repeating those words once again, he then said: “This really has made me feel somewhat disappointed.”

Witnessing Chen Chang Sheng’s ability, was one of the most important aims for his participation in the Grand Examination.

From when he was still outside of Li Palace, to the Hall of Zhao Wen, River Qu, then the woodlands outside of the Tower of Purging Dust, seeing the scene of Luo Luo and Chen Chang Sheng together made him feel enraged, then calm; the more enraged he was, the calmer he also became.

Chen Chang Sheng stood up, looked at him and said: “Hit me first before saying anything.”

After these words, his figure once again disappeared.

Sand billowed everywhere within the tower, as if it was a blizzard.

He forcefully wrung out the last of his True Essence reserves, his

divine sense calculating the positioning at an unbelievable speed.

Within the blizzard-like sand, his figure flickered in and out of view, sometimes in the East, sometimes in the West.

In just an instant, countless footprints appeared, covering the floor, densely, akin to the myriad of stars in the night sky.

He followed the positioning of the Twenty-Eight Mansions in his movement, his footwork erratic to the extreme, extraordinarily difficult to grasp, as if in the next moment he would appear before Zhuang Huan Yu and deliver a decisive blow.

No matter how fast, swift and powerful the Sword of Hithering Light was, it couldn't catch up with Chen Chang Sheng while he was in this state.

Chen Chang Sheng did not keep track of Zhuang Huan Yu's sword, nor did he care for his surroundings, he only concentrated on his own movements through Discerning Steps.

Discerning Steps traversed the stars, making use of the blizzard to cover its tracks, it was sure to eventually arrive before Zhuang Huan Yu.

It seemed to be an exceedingly brilliant method of countering.

Every time the curved sword flashes were about to land upon his body, they would inevitably just brush past his shoulders.

Zhuang Huan Yu's expression became severe, but didn't seem anxious.

He couldn't tell where Chen Chang Sheng's position was, neither could he predict where Chen Chang Sheng would appear.

Therefore, he closed his eyes.

He wasn't using his divine sense to perceive Chen Chang Sheng's position, because even if he was to perceive it, his sword would not be able to land in time.

The Sword of Hithering Light was released from his hand and pierced into the sand covered ground, lightly quivering.

He spread out his hands, dark hair swaying, True Essence exploding outwards.

The Sword of Hithering Light's quivering immediately became intense.

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Several hundred sword forms left the sword, instantly inundating the space within the Tower of Purging Dust.

In the next moment, several sword forms that were in the

Northwestern area suddenly stalled.

Chen Chang Sheng was struck by those sword forms; his body heavily pounded upon the wall, then slid down onto the floor, raising a cloud of dust.

Upon his body, there appeared three wounds, blood slowly flowed.

“Right now, I have struck you down,” said Zhuang Huan Yu, opening his eyes and looking at him calmly.

Chapter 162 – Combustion

The Sword of Hithering Light is a sword art and also a physical sword, it is Heavenly Academy's dao sword, or more accurately, it was Vice-principal Zhuang's personal sword.

The sword isn't listed upon the Banner of Hundred Arms, but its power is comparable to the weapons listed in the last section of the banner.

If a normal person was to receive three attacks from the sword in succession, no matter how perfect their Purification might be, they would still be cleaved apart, or at the very least, suffer heavy injuries, unable to stand; yet, Chen Chang Sheng pulled himself up by supporting himself on the wall.

He had however, suffered fairly heavy injuries, blood trickled out from the sword wounds on his chest, a rather frightening visage.

“So it's only up to this degree?”

Zhuang Huan Yu looked at him with an expressionless face, after a momentary pause, he continued, with a slightly harsher tone: “Being only to this degree, what right do you have to be Her Highness' tutor?”

The “Highness” referred to was obviously not Princess Ping Guo, neither would it have been Prince Chen Liu, it was Her Highness, Luo Luo.

“If you really did completely grasp Discerning Steps, perhaps you could make me vigilant, but your Discerning Steps is, in the end,

fake, or perhaps better said to be a forgery; fitting in form, but spurious in truth.”

He continued: “How could it possibly be used for battling? It’s nothing more than an illusion, all that’s needed is for me to close my eyes; your motion technique cannot fool the world itself.”

Zhuang Huan Yu looked at him, continuing his speech: “The same as the method you taught Her Highness for controlling True Essence, it may seem brilliant, but in reality, it’s nothing more than a twisted method that cannot lead the way forwards, using nothing more than minor smarts. If you really wished for Her Highness to have a wonderful future, you should have her continue to stay at Heavenly Academy, using discipline arts researched from the orthodox schools to solve her problem.”

That’s right, this was the reason for his anger against Chen Chang Sheng, this was why he felt dissatisfied with him. He had hoped that Chen Chang Sheng could be stronger than this, proving to himself and the world that he had the qualifications to be Her Highness’ tutor; unlike this, being so easily beaten by himself, being, in the end, nothing more than a fraud.

“That’s something we will handle ourselves, thank you for your suggestion, but I don’t see myself accepting it,” said Chen Chang Sheng, raising his right arm and using his sleeve to wipe away the blood on his jaw while looking at Zhuang Huan Yu.

Zhuang Huan Yu’s arrow-like brow twitched, he looked at Chen Chang Sheng, displeased, and said in a harsh tone: “Don’t tell me you still wish to obstinately remain reprehensible? Reality has

already proven, no matter how perfect your Purification or how strong your defence, you still aren't a match for a truly strong opponent, your True Essence volume is far too small and your cultivation level is far too low."

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent, his head lowered, gazing at the short sword's hilt he was tightly clenching.

Zhuang Huan Yu saw that Chen Chang Sheng didn't give any response and for some reason, became even more enraged and said, in a frosty voice: "Cultivation is a grand learning; battles in the end, rely upon the use of True Essence for combat. Since ancient times, cultivation first requires Purification, then Meditation, Ethereal Opening; each stage has its reason."

He continued: "Purification is a requirement for Meditation, but isn't a means for battling, for your True Essence levels to be so meagre, you must only be at the lower stage of Meditation, yet you seek to use your Purification for achieving victory against your opponent; such arrogance and ignorance, am I wrong in saying you're on a twisted path? If it was just yourself then so be it, yet you wish to take Her Highness on a path she will not be able to return from?"

The tower was quiet, only the cold voice of the young expert from Heavenly Academy and its strong reverberation could be heard, landing upon the sand covered floor.

"His level is too low, nothing else can be done, in the end, it seems Chen Chang Sheng really could only reach this far."

In the secluded and tranquil room on the second floor, the voice of Star Seizer Academy's principal could be heard, it was slightly morose, regretful, yet also conveyed a sense of relief that everything will soon end.

The room was very large, with everyone sitting in their respective positions, remaining silent. Hearing the voice of Zhuang Huan Yu drift in from outside the window, they all came to this same conclusion.

In the previous match, Chen Chang Sheng managed to win against that youthful expert from Shuang City that was ranked around 20th on the proclamation because he had utilised his motion technique to its maximum speed, his sudden usage of Discerning Steps had also caught his opponent off guard and they lost in the end to the power Chen Chang Sheng could bring to bear in close combat.

But his opponent this time is Zhuang Huan Yu.

Zhuang Huan Yu is Heavenly Academy's most outstanding student, cultivating discipline arts from orthodox schools, each step of his cultivation was exceptionally robust and stable, never rushed, there were also teachers from the academy giving advice and instruction.

His experience was remarkably extensive, being able to rely upon using only his True Essence and manoeuvres to maintain an absolute advantage, directly crushing Chen Chang Sheng and not giving him any chance to get close; this naturally ensured there was no chance of any surprises happening.

“Principal Mao Qiu Yu’s illustrious disciple, is indeed outstanding,” said the Bishop of Temple Seminary in melancholic praise.

The personages in the room had been observing the battles for some time.

Having seen both Zhe Xiu and Gou Han Shi battle, they knew that Zhuang Huan Yu wasn’t the strongest in terms of cultivation level, but he was the most stable.

Perhaps it could better be said that it would be difficult for him ignore levels and defeat someone stronger, Gou Han Shi for example; but against someone weaker, they would absolutely be unable to defeat him.

Especially after observing this current battle, they all had the feeling that Zhuang Huan Yu’s ability was possibly even greater than rumoured, even if he was to go against Her Highness or Zhe Xiu, he could possibly put up a fight, with the outcome hard to predict.

How could his current opponent, Chen Chang Sheng, possibly be his match?

That’s right, the observing personages and Li Palace clergy that were located in different rooms, all of them had already affirmed Chen Chang Sheng’s loss.

After multiple battles, they could confirm, this Orthodox Academy student that couldn’t cultivate a few months ago, had completed his Purification, but he was only at the lower stage of the Meditation Realm; whether in terms of capacity or purity for

True Essence, or even in other aspects, he was still vastly inferior to the true experts that were participating in the examination.

Chen Chang Sheng being able to reach this point, entering the final 8, apart from luck, was due to his unimaginable speed and physical strength.

At this point, his luck had already lost all meaning, because his opponent is a true expert; no matter how great a speed or strength, it was meaningless, those true experts can directly crush him through their cultivation level and True Essence volume, as long as they didn't make a mistake in battle tactics, the way that youthful expert from Shuang City did, Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any chance of victory.

The difference between levels wasn't something that could be bridged through determination or courage.

“So True Essence volume really is the most important thing?” Chen Chang Sheng said to himself as he looked at the short sword that was tightly gripped within his hand.

Zhuang Huan Yu looked at him and lightly frowned, not knowing what he meant by saying those words at this moment.

Chen Chang Sheng's face did not reveal any sort of expression, appearing rather rigid, no one could tell that he was currently struggling within, unable to make a decision as to whether if he should take the risk.

A cultivator's True Essence came from the night stars, in guiding Starlight for Purification, Star Brilliance, which contained a mysterious energy, would enter the cultivator's body at the same

time. Upon Meditation, once it came into contact with the cultivator's divine sense, or perhaps better described as ignited, it would convert into True Essence the cultivator can freely manipulate.

Chen Chang Sheng's True Essence volume was indeed meagre and exceedingly impure, his meridian channels are broken, how could he make the True Essence flow freely?

Yet, his body contained vast quantities of Star Brilliance, in other words, were he to wish for it, he could come to possess greater quantities of True Essence, but that would involve a massive risk.

In the underground space beneath that abandoned well at New North Bridge, in front of that Black Dragon, for some reason unknown to him, he had managed to pass the bottleneck of Purification and successfully perform Meditation.

His body was currently much stronger than it previously was, but he still had difficulty in deciding to once again enter Meditation, because failure would likely mean death.

The medical record contained within the Classic of Meditation's addendum and his own experience all provided proof for this conclusion.

Going against the spectre of death and taking on such a risk for the first time, required courage; attempting it for a second time required even greater amounts of courage.

Luckily, he had already experienced imminent death twice; once at the Ivy League gathering and another on the day he had forcefully entered Meditation in the underground space, in front of

the Black Dragon.

Having experienced death, something that had been on his mind for many years; its real significance was that it allowed him to come to an understanding – when facing death, he would never have surrendered, but now, he also wouldn't be as fearful as he used to be.

Just as with his current situation, facing against a strong opponent like Zhuang Huan Yu, he wouldn't surrender, neither would he be afraid.

He raised his head and looked at Zhuang Huan Yu, saying: "Since it's come to this, I'll give it a try."

Try what? Apart from himself, no one within the tower knew, none could guess.

Chen Chang Sheng closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then expelled as much of it as he possibly could.

It was as if an air bubble had gurgled out from an underground fount.

In that breath, his lungs became almost devoid of air, suddenly becoming empty, devoid of everything.

His sea of consciousness awoke, its surface gently undulating with small waves.

A trace of extremely dense divine sense, emerged from within his sea of consciousness, drifting upwards, travelling towards some unknown location in the deep-blue sky above, as if it were leaving this expanse of Heaven and Earth.

Within but a moment, that divine sense returned from the heavens to the ground, shrinking, from without to within, entering his body and arriving at that micro Heaven and Earth.

His divine sense transformed into a gust of wind, freely traversing that Heaven and Earth.

The wind was he; he was the wind.

He saw the nine broken mountain ranges, saw the endless wild plains and saw that lake which was suspended within the air.

Finally, he saw that snow plain.

The snow plain was separated into tens of fragments by exceedingly deep fissures.

In comparison to the meditative introspection he had done some days ago, the snow plain was much thicker, even at this time, there were snowflakes continuously falling.

For these past few days, he had incessantly guided Starlight into his body.

The snowflakes were all extremely pure Star Brilliance, all they needed were to be inflamed by divine essence and they would become a clear water that could nourish this world, a clear water that is True Essence.

In the words of Zhuang Huan Yu, of many others and the countless words recorded upon the scripture; for cultivators, the most important thing, is True Essence.

Chen Chang Sheng remained hesitant for a long time.

He truly was unafraid of death, but he didn't want to experience that pain once more, because that pain really might cause him to go into a coma, if that were to happen, this match would naturally result in a loss.

But it was something that had to be done.

Hesitation is just hesitation; that gust of wind didn't halt, it drifted towards a fragment of the snow plain in the Southeast.

Akin to a wildfire descending upon a mountain that is overflowing with dry leaves.

An explosion rung out, the snow plain fragment was violently set ablaze.

In the tranquil and secluded room on the second floor, the important figures all sat in their respective positions silently, waiting for Chen Chang Sheng's concession of defeat, the end of this match and the final outcome to this year's Grand Examination, with the tradition faction's plot, or perhaps attempt, suffering a heavy setback.

Yet, at this moment, an aura suddenly appeared within the tower.

That aura was rather frenzied, intensely fiery, akin to someone having lit a pyre on the floor below that was exceedingly large in size.

Mo Yu's expression faintly trembled, she stood up, her court gown left behind a blur within the dark room as she instantly moved herself to the window side.

Her gaze went behind the window blinds and rested on the floor below, her face was expressionless, but her eyes revealed a strange glimmer.

All the important personages within the room were experts of a high level, how could they possibly not be able to tell what that aura represented? No one at this moment, was concerned with the ability level Mo Yu just displayed, they all arrived, one after the other, beside the window, looking down towards the lower floor, following what they saw, their expressions immediately changed, momentarily becoming speechless.

Before the stone wall below, Chen Chang Sheng closed his eyes and stood atop the sand, beside his bare feet were grains of sand, soaked through by the blood that was trickling down from his body.

That frenzied and fiery aura, came from his body.

Everyone could clearly feel that his cultivation level was in the process of rising, the True Essence within his body was increasing and his presence was becoming more powerful.

Under the perception of divine sense, he became increasingly radiant.

Akin to a real pyre.

“How could this be possible?”

“How could this be possible.”

They all stood by the window, witnessing this scene, the expressions on their faces became extremely strange, extraordinarily shocked.

Chen Chang Sheng was actually commencing meditative introspection at this moment, transitioning Star Brilliance into True Essence.

The problem was, apart from at the very beginning, when entering the Meditative Realm from the Purification realm, could such a strong aura leak out into the surroundings, all while the cultivator completely burns the Star Brilliance they had previously amassed into True Essence.

After that, the cultivator's transitions of Star Brilliance into True Essence would be nothing more than a trickle, how could there possibly be such a big disturbance?

Was this Chen Chang Sheng's first meditative introspection?

Impossible, from the previous few matches, they all clearly knew that he had completely moved from Purification to Meditation in his cultivation, otherwise, his body wouldn't have any True Essence flow.

Then, what was this current scene?

Could it possibly be, that this world can have someone that could undergo their first meditation twice?

Silence filled the tower.

Everyone was shocked to the point of being speechless.

Whether be it those important figures by the window that were highly knowledgeable, or the Li Palace clergy.

Zhuang Huan Yu was even more shocked, unable to say anything.

The temperature within the tower instantly surged.

Chen Chang Sheng closed his eyes, the sand near his feet rose into the air, the clumps of sand that were formed from his blood, after being scorched by that formless heat, dried and broke apart in turn.

All the blood evaporated into smoke.

Within the dancing sand, Chen Chang Sheng's complexion became increasingly red, it could be perceived that his body was becoming increasingly hot.

Seeing this scene, one of the Archbishops from the Holy Church lightly held his brows, calming slightly.

He didn't know how Chen Chang Sheng could undergo his first meditation twice, but he could tell that the youth wasn't able to control the Star Brilliance's burning within his body.

"If this continues, even if he doesn't burn to death, his mind will be damaged from the heat," said Prince Chen Liu in a worried voice.

Only by successfully completing Purification, could a cultivator's body withstand the temperatures and the power that came from transitioning Star Brilliance into True Essence in their first Meditation.

But Chen Chang Sheng's current Meditation was evidently rather strange, the amount of Star Brilliance that was burning within his body seemed slightly excessive, his body's temperature was hard to restrain, continuously rising.

The Tower of Purging Dust became increasingly hot, outside of the tower, there was suddenly the sound of cicadas, as if Summer had arrived early.

Deep within the Li Palace complex, there is a palace.

Within that palace, in a corner, there is a grey flowerpot.

Within the pot, there is a plant, with multiple green stems, yet there existed but a single green leaf.

The edge of the green leaf was slightly withered, lightly curled.

“One's memory really does worsen when getting old, to have actually forgotten the watering.”

His Holiness walked up to the flowerpot, gazing at the green leaf and sighing.

He then picked up a wooden ladle and extended it towards the pool besides the pot.

Chapter 163 – A New Downpour Washes Away Dust Of The Past

Clear water steadily flowed out from the ladle, landing within the grey flowerpot; upon being struck by the water, the green leaf continuously quivered.

Having completed the watering, His Holiness threw the ladle back into the pool, holding his hands behind him as he left the palace, as if he had just completed something very ordinary.

The soil within the pot became moistened, the green leaf that was previously slightly withered, was once again restored to its original state; its edge was no longer curled and its veins becoming all the more vivid

A drop of water, akin to a bead of dew, lightly rolled across its surface.

Many days ago, His Holiness and His Eminence had a conversation at this location. At the time, His Eminence said that maturity required rainwater to vitalise, yet at times it needed pressure, currently, that green leaf had already suffered too much pressure and perhaps, required rainwater to revitalise.

The Tower of Purging Dust is located within the Green Leaf World.

Chen Chang Sheng's body was incredibly hot, his face was completely red, while the blood upon his clothing had long evaporated.

His presence became increasingly powerful, at the same time, that arid atmosphere within the tower also became increasingly intense.

Mo Yu stood by the window, looking at the youth who was currently enduring incredible pain, she remained expressionless, yet the hands within her sleeves were tightly clenched together.

“Is it possible to make him stop?” Prince Chen Liu discreetly glanced at her before asking.

Mo Yu remained silent, at this moment, Chen Chang Sheng was at the vital stage of initial meditation.

Not mentioning that his eyes were currently closed and he wasn't aware of anything happening outside of his body, even if he could communicate with the outside world, he couldn't halt the burning of Star Brilliance within his body; if he could, why would he currently be in such a perilous situation?

To interrupt this process and drag him back from the brink of death, only outside help was possible and it had to be from something exceedingly powerful, maybe even requiring a power on the level of being legendary.

In the Capital, only two people possessed this type of power, His Holiness, and Her Divine Majesty.

The problem was, Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy were coordinated emblems used by elderly members of the

Orthodoxy and the tradition faction, whom were both loyal to the Imperial Chen Clan, to advance a challenge; how could Her Divine Majesty, or His Holiness, possibly intervene?

The temperature within the Tower of Purging Dust became increasingly high, while the cry of cicadas outside the tower became increasingly loud, this was a reaction from the Green Leaf World.

Chen Chang Sheng, in the end, had underestimated the danger of burning Star Brilliance, because his body's condition was different from others.

Since the Heavenly Tomes' descent unto the world, this continent had never seen someone with the same condition, even within the Three Thousand Scriptures of the Way, there wasn't a similar record.

He really might just die like this, or become an idiot from suffering the high temperature.

Who could change this? Who could extinguish that formless flame that was burning within his body, lowering the temperature of this Green Leaf World?

It was at this moment, from the blue skies above, a raindrop suddenly descended.

Following this, a thousand drops, tens of thousands, a rainstorm.

PAPAPAPAPA

An endless downpour descended from the heavens, falling upon the tower's black eaves and the sand, falling upon Chen Chang Sheng's body.

Apart from the sound of rain, nothing else could be heard.

Everyone looked towards the sky, staring at that torrent of rain, speechless, full of awe.

Within Mo Yu's eyes, there was suddenly a shudder, and some signs of bewilderment.

There were no clouds, yet there was rain.

This rain was obviously something that came from outside.

One of the Archbishops of the Holy Church looked at the rain that was pouring down from the heavens, his expression constantly shifting.

As one of the six heads of the Orthodoxy, he naturally knew where this rain came from.

But as His Holiness' confidant, he couldn't understand, why was there this rain?

Why did the Saint interfere, and help that youth from Orthodox Academy?

Rain can wash away the dust of this world and it can also carry away warmth.

Rainwater fell upon Chen Chang Sheng's body, coming into contact with his scorching skin, instantly evaporating into mist; at the same time, his body's temperature also rapidly fell.

The tower's temperature also rapidly fell, it previously seemed to be Summer, sweltering and hard to endure, after a spell of rain, it had become Autumn, the chill slowly growing.

Zhuang Huan Yu suddenly felt rather cold.

Just previously, he could hear a single cough coming down from the second floor.

He didn't know who had coughed, but he knew that person was reminding him that he had to strike first, before the end of this rain.

Even though they weren't sure as to what was happening to Chen Chang Sheng's body, they couldn't allow the chance for any surprises.

But he didn't move.

That's because the Autumn rain was far too grand, carving out

channels upon the sand, provoking awe from within him; he didn't dare to cross this boundary.

Yet, that didn't matter.

Because he is Heavenly Academy's pride and he himself was also very proud.

From the start, he had wanted to prove to the entire continent and to Her Highness that Chen Chang Sheng is inferior to himself, therefore, defeating Chen Chang Sheng when he is at his strongest, was the ideal outcome.

A spell of Autumn rain, a spell of cold.

The tower slowly became chilly.

The rainstorm gradually lightened, becoming a pitter-patter.

Chen Chang Sheng opened his eyes.

His eyes were bright, akin to beads of rain, able to clearly see the hidden visage of this world.

The sand that was dancing around his body, had already fallen; the True Essence that had been leaking out, was all gathered back into his body.

Once again experiencing initial meditation, thus, he who had successfully skipped realm levels, was currently at a pinnacle.

He raised the short sword in his hand.

A sword manifestation, akin to the Autumn rain, shrouded the entire tower, instantly arriving before Zhuang Huan Yu.

Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, the First Movement, Rising Flurry.

Zhuang Huan Yu's face instantly paled.

He never could have expected, after but a short period of time, akin to having only experienced a spell of torrential rain, with Chen Chang Sheng having closed his eyes and then opened them; that Chen Chang Sheng would become this powerful.

The sword manifestation that was akin to the Autumn rain, coalesced to its utmost point; the True Essence imbued within was also powerful to an extraordinary degree.

Under the trembling state of his mind, Zhuang Huang Yu actually didn't respond, entering a completely disadvantageous position.

That formed yet primed sword manifestation, was akin to an Autumn rain that was on the verge of falling, being only a foot away from the centre of Zhuang Huan Yu's brows.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter; rain on the black eaves slowly fell, striking upon the floor.

The sand had already been washed away by the rain, revealing the green slabs that were beneath.

The raindrops drummed upon the green slabs; the sounds of dripping caused the area's atmosphere to become abnormally tense.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't continue advancing his blade.

This was his first strike after breaking through, his concentration and sword momentum were currently in peak condition; Zhuang Huan Yu, having momentarily lost his concentration, could very possibly be struck down by a single move.

But Chen Chang Sheng didn't.

He waited for Zhuang Huan Yu to regain his senses.

That's because when he was meditating and had closed his eyes, Zhuang Huan Yu waited for him.

Whether be it because the Autumn rain carving out channels in the sand had caused Zhuang Huan Yu to not dare to advance, or because of his pride, regardless, he had given Chen Chang Sheng a

chance.

Therefore, Chen Chang Sheng had to give this chance back to him.

The Tower of Purging Dust was quiet.

“The battles of young people are indeed different,” said someone on the second floor melancholily.

For adults, in a duel as important as the Grand Examination, they definitely wouldn’t give their opponent any chance.

Only young people would do this.

Maybe it was because they had experienced comparatively little, having accrued a limited amount of dust upon their body, or perhaps it was the Autumn rain, washing away the dust upon them.

Regardless, in comparison to adults, they still believed in the concept of being fair; this was perhaps naive and childish, but it also represented a kind of vitality and self-confidence.

“You can’t beat me anymore.”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Zhuang Huan Yu and said: “Just concede defeat.”

Chapter 164 – Mountain Toppling

Currently, Chen Chang Sheng's clothing was in tatters, his chest wounded, it was as miserable a scene as you may wish to envisage, if Tang Thirty-Six was to see him, he would definitely mock him, saying that he's been beaten to the point of looking like a mongrel. Yet, under this type of situation, he actually wanted Zhuang Huan Yu to concede defeat –from his expression, he didn't appear to be joking.

His manner was very serious, and his voice, sincere, this caused Zhuang Huan Yu to become livid, feeling tremendously humiliated and demeaned.

Chen Chang Sheng did not intend to mock him, only calmly giving a verdict.

Whether if it was due to that Autumn rain, or because his body's strength had increased; since the scorching Star Brilliance didn't burn him to death, it could be inferred that the snow plain can supply an endless amount of True Essence.

In truth, his current True Essence levels were more abundant than ever before – the biggest discrepancy between him and Zhuang Huan Yu was now eliminated, why wouldn't he feel confident?

“What is he basing his confidence on?” asked the principal of Star Seizer Academy, from beside the window, with a frown on his face.

Even if Chen Chang Sheng had inexplicably undergone a second

initial meditation, all the personages within the Capital knew that he had only determined his Fated Star and started guiding Starlight to purify for less than a year, while Zhuang Huan Yu had already been cultivating for over 10 years, on what basis did he believe his True Essence levels to have caught up to his opponent's?

Chen Chang Sheng used reality to prove to everyone, that his confidence was logical, even if it wasn't clearly apparent as to where the logic was.

Zhuang Huan Yu stared at him, the Sword of Hithering Light that was pierced into the green slabs, lightly shook. Hundreds of sword forms once again began to take shape, striking towards Chen Chang Sheng from all directions; it was as if another spell of rain had descended upon the tower.

Chen Chang Sheng's right hand was grasping the short sword. The position he held onto was somewhat high, with his palm covering the scabbard's edge, as if he was holding both the scabbard and hilt at the same time, making him naturally unable to draw the blade.

He didn't draw his sword, neither did he dodge or use his body to forcibly take it on, instead, he wielded both sword and scabbard as one and swept outwards.

Within the tower, a buzzing noise could be heard and a gust of wind arose.

Several powerful sword drafts came into contact with the surrounding sword forms, giving off several muffled sounds, one after the other, the sword forms shattered and disintegrated.

Pitting True Essence against True Essence, with both equally matched, this naturally meant using a sword to break a sword form, would be easily achieved.

Expressions changed for all those important figures by the second floor window. It could finally be confirmed that Chen Chang Sheng's cultivation level was completely different from how it was previously; whether in terms of purity or the volume of his True Essence, he was, at the very least, no longer any weaker than Zhuang Huan Yu.

The hands that were tightly clenched together in Mo Yu's sleeves had already loosened, she brushed the window frame, remaining expressionless, yet internally, she was not as calm as she projected herself to be.

She didn't wish for others to know that she did not want anything to happen to Chen Chang Sheng. At this moment, she no longer had to worry that he wouldn't be able to defeat Zhuang Huan Yu; yet, Chen Chang Sheng's performance, alongside his unreasonable surge of True Essence, made her think of that event, many nights ago, when she had watched the stars with Her Divine Majesty at the Platform of Sweetdew.

That night, Her Divine Majesty had perceived that someone within the Capital had determined their Fated Star, with the star

being located extremely far away; that person's divine sense was extremely calm and powerful.

That person... was it Chen Chang Sheng?

The important figures stood by the second floor window, contemplating; the battle below had already become intense.

Chen Chang Sheng used the sword and scabbard as one, relying upon True Essence to forcibly destroy those rainstorm-like sword forms, his figure became indistinct and at the next moment, he arrived in front of Zhuang Huan Yu.

A distance of 30 odd metres, covered in an instant, he didn't borrow the sword momentum of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, but had used Discerning Steps.

By this time, Zhuang Huan Yu had already calmed down completely, Chen Chang Sheng easily destroying his sword forms made him feel slightly surprised, but it wasn't enough to distract him again. His face didn't show any signs of fear, all that could be seen, was the extending of his right hand; the Sword of Hithering Light increased in its shaking and with a loud ringing sound, it released itself from the ground and returned to his hand.

CHA CHA CHA CHA

Over a dozen continuous sounds of a sword reverberated out.

It was as if the sword in his hand had come alive, its keen edge cutting through the air with a slicing sound as it thrust towards Chen Chang Sheng.

The floor that had been washed out by the Autumn rain had remnants of wet sand left behind, that sand was swept into the air by Zhuang Huan Yu's blade becoming dozens of minute sand streams.

Those sand streams were a sword art; they were a visible movement of the sword.

Chen Chang Sheng could use True Essence to destroy those sword forms, but if he wanted to block those lightning-like sword manoeuvres, it would require an even more sublime sword move.

The expressions of those observing personages on the upper floor became extremely focused, they had all seen or heard of the event, detailing Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi's exchange of manoeuvres at the Ivy League gathering.

They knew that this unremarkable youth from Orthodox Academy was the same as Gou Han Shi, someone that had read the scriptures in their entirety, knowing sword arts from countless sects and cloisters, they couldn't stop themselves feeling curious as to how he would counter.

Tens of sand streams streaked towards Chen Chang Sheng from various angles.

Behind each stream, was a cold blade's edge.

Chen Chang Sheng still didn't draw his sword.

His hand held onto the sword's hilt and scabbard, even if he wanted to draw the blade, he couldn't.

He grasped the sword short and struck out while holding it as such.

A blow that was exceptionally clean and sharp; simple and powerful.

It didn't even resemble a sword art, nor could anything superb about it be seen, akin to a married woman washing clothes by the river, grasping a wooden club and continuously pounding upon a stone.

A seemingly normal strike, yet as he raised and struck out the short sword, at least three personages by the window side suddenly cried out in surprise.

“The Staff of Mountain Toppling.”

That's right, what Chen Chang Sheng used was not a sword art, but a stave art.

He had read the scriptures in their entirety from a young age, reading a large amount of books extensively. Upon entering

Orthodox Academy, he had ceaselessly compared them with the works on cultivation contained within the library, converting as much of the scriptures as he could from what he had read in his previous 14 years, into knowledge that was needed for cultivation. In discussing knowledge of cultivation methods from the various sects, cloisters and schools in the world, apart from Gou Han Shi, no one else could compare with him.

His cultivation was also extremely diligent, within just half a year, he had grasped a large amount of sword arts and other cultivation methods; at the Ivy League gathering, he guided Luo Luo and Tang Thirty-Six to victory over Guan Fei Bai and Qi Jian; what he relied upon, was this capability.

Yet, a lot of people would forget, that his understanding of those sword arts and cultivation methods, for the most part, was nothing more than academic.

He knew how the Three Forms of Wen Shui should be utilised; the sequencing and angle of Lian Shan's Seven Swords; yet, this didn't mean he could use the Three Forms of Wen Shui, or that a casual manoeuvre from him would be Lian Shan's Seven Swords. Not to mention he had yet to complete his Purification at the time; being unable to cultivate, even if he wanted to practise the sword, he couldn't.

Even if he were to be hard working and diligent, no matter how spectacular his talent might be, it wouldn't be possible to grasp so many different techniques in just a few short months.

Wanting to have a measure of success on the path of the sword, required more than 10 years of hard work at the very least.

Whether be it Qiu Shan Jun, or Guan Fei Bai, who had proven at the Ivy League gathering that he could use a hundred or more different sword arts, it would be the same.

Others might forget all these things, but Chen Chang Sheng himself would not, he knew very clearly that he couldn't possibly win against Zhuang Huan Yu or any of the four disciples from Li Mountain in terms of sword arts; even if he could think of a move to counter his opponent's sword manoeuvres, he wouldn't be able to perform that move in the midst of such an intense and stressful battle.

Cultivators of different stages, would require battle methods of different levels. He currently required a relatively simple and effective means of battling; he didn't think of a sword art that could counter Heavenly Academy's dao sword, but something he could currently firmly grasp and utilise, therefore, he lowered his grip, simultaneously holding onto both hilt and scabbard.

This method of handling his sword made it evident, he had no intention of drawing the blade.

With such a grip, the short sword became a short staff.

What he used, is a stave art.

The Staff of Mountain Toppling.

The cries almost erupted at exactly the same time up on the second floor.

The ones who let out the cries of exclamation were the two Archbishops of the Holy Church and the Bishop of Temple Seminary.

That was because they knew of this stave art and it was also because they hadn't seen this stave art for many years.

The Staff of Mountain Toppling is a stave art from Orthodox Academy, legend had it, that it was originally a penalty stave used by Orthodox Academy's Regulatory Department to discipline students that had broken rules.

Orthodox Academy had already declined for over a decade, this stave art naturally also didn't appear upon the continent for over a decade.

The two Archbishops of the Holy Church were important figures from the Orthodoxy's new faction, and were naturally opposed against Orthodox Academy, which represented the tradition faction, yet, even for them, after over a decade, to suddenly see the Staff of Mountain Toppling that was renowned within the Orthodoxy, they couldn't restrain themselves from letting out gasping cries of exclamation; their expressions instantly became rather complicated.

Xue Xing Chuan and Xu Shi Ji were likewise, individuals that had seen Orthodox Academy's past glory, they were only slightly

slower than the three bishops, but they also recognised the stave art used by Chen Chang Sheng, causing their expressions to immediately change.

The Staff of Mountain Toppling is Orthodox Academy's penalty stave, following the concept of being rough and direct; simple and concise. Its aim was to topple students, to cause pain.

This stave art didn't seem to have any logic that could be spoken of, but in reality, it concealed a lot of logic, the same as Orthodox Academy's regulations; you couldn't possibly avoid it, you could only endure it.

Zhuang Huan Yu's expression became incredibly severe, yet the sword in his hand did not slow down in the slightest.

The momentum from Chen Chang Sheng's short sword was too direct, direct to the point where it seemingly couldn't even be considered a manoeuvre.

From the look of it, it seemed like the sword in his hand had enough leeway to forcefully strike upon Chen Chang Sheng's body first, but the short sword in Chen Chang Sheng's hand gave him a feeling that if he was to do so, at the next moment, no matter how heavy an injury Chen Chang Sheng was to sustain, the short sword and scabbard would still strike upon himself.

Forcefully striking first seemed to lack any meaning; dodging? It seems dodging wasn't possible, then all that could be done was to block.

Zhuang Huan Yu's True Essence boundlessly flooded out, the blade's edge cut through the air, heading towards Chen Chang Sheng's sword.

The Staff of Mountain Toppling against the Sword of Hithering Light, akin to Orthodox Academy against Heavenly Academy.

If the newly revived Orthodox Academy wanted to regain its position within the Orthodoxy, it seems it had to pass this hurdle.

The two blades met in the air, separated, and then met again. No matter how unreasonably Chen Chang Sheng's sword struck, it would be blocked by Zhuang Huan Yu's sword; no matter how transcendent Zhuang Huan Yu's sword manoeuvre was, it couldn't break Chen Chang Sheng's sword.

Within an extremely short period of time, the two swords crossed each other over a dozen times.

Within the tower, ear-deafening sounds of clashing resounded.

Surrounding the two of them, over a dozen white air masses would constantly appear and then instantly blow apart.

Those air masses were manifestations arising from the tumultuous clashing of their swords.

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

Two figures suddenly separated from each other.

Zhuang Huan Yu let out a muffled groan, his face slightly pale, the right hand that held his sword was lightly trembling.

He hadn't managed to completely seal off Chen Chang Sheng's sword.

At the last moment, Chen Chang Sheng's sword and scabbard came down, striking upon his wrist.

If his sword manifestation wasn't pointing straight at the time, in the midst of thrusting forwards, barely brushing past the tip of Chen Chang Sheng's scabbard, his wrist bone would probably be shattered right now.

A direct face-off, sword against sword, had actually resulted in him being in the weaker position.

Zhuang Huan Yu couldn't accept this fact; his face became slightly ashen.

At the next moment, he threw his scabbard onto the ground, once again heading forwards.

Chapter 165 – Carrying Boots

A blade without its sheath, will display the brilliance of its edge.

Zhuang Huan Yu's sword cut through the air, no longer having any kind of restraint; wielding a fierce True Essence and thrusting towards Chen Chang Sheng's body; a brilliant green light emanated from its tip and a whistling sound could be heard.

The sand vestiges once again rose from the ground, dancing around the arena.

Chen Chang Sheng used Discerning Steps, his figure suddenly becoming indistinct and drawing out a stream of afterimages, encircling Zhuang Huan Yu, the sword short in his hand was akin to a staff, continuously striking out.

It remained a barrage.

Zhuang Huan Yu didn't have any fear and his sword manoeuvres were spectacular.

Though his attacks were overly wild due to anger, his defence was still flawless; it could be seen that he wasn't perturbed in the slightest.

No matter how fast Chen Chang Sheng's steps were, or how straightforward and severe his strikes, he couldn't find an opening, nor create one. Conversely, Zhuang Huan Yu's sword manifestations became increasingly composed.

Countless sword flashes, akin to a formless net, caused Chen

Chang Sheng's steps to become progressively harder, even if he wanted to distance himself, it would no longer be an easy task.

Chen Chang Sheng could tell what Zhuang Huan Yu's intention was – he wanted to use this type of sword art to eradicate the advantage Chen Chang Sheng had with the speed of his motion technique, causing it to become a simple contest between manoeuvres and True Essence – Chen Chang Sheng made a decision without any hesitation.

Chen Chang Sheng's motion technique suddenly adjusted, his speed increased to a bewildering degree, taking three steps towards the right and appearing on Zhuang Huan Yu's other side.

Zhuang Huan Yu twisted his wrist and thrusted outwards, a sword strike that was spectacular beyond words; it directly swept Chen Chang Sheng's short sword out of the way, following the momentum to pierce towards Chen Chang Sheng's throat.

Chen Chang Sheng was suddenly in danger, yet his expression didn't change, that's because he had already moved within Zhuang Huan Yu's sword flash.

Now, neither could evade.

He sidestepped and allowed the Sword of Hithering Light to cut into his shoulder, the short sword in his hand directly slammed towards Zhuang Huan Yu's face.

Zhuang Huan Yu shifted the Sword of Hithering Light, using the sword's hilt to meet the blow, at the same time, he crossed his

steps, holding the blade flat out to once again thrust towards Chen Chang Sheng's throat.

In but an instant, the battle had undergone an enormous change.

Incessant sounds of clashing once again resounded within the tower; this was the sound of two swords coming into contact, but this time, in comparison to the first bout, the sword cries were unrelenting, as if they would continue for eternity.

White air masses continuously formed and then exploded, disappearing; whether Chen Chang Sheng or Zhuang Huan Yu, they had both decided to determine who would be the victor.

CHA CHA CHA

Three sounds of something splitting erupted.

BANG BANG

Two sounds of solid strikes resounded.

The drizzle came to a stop; wet sand fell upon the floor. Chen Chang Sheng and Zhuang Huan Yu suddenly separated from each other, retreating a distance of around 30 odd metres and then coming to a stop.

Chen Chang Sheng had been pierced three times, coupled with the previous sword wounds, he now had a total of six wounds crisscrossing his chest; blood streamed out, a disturbing sight.

Zhuang Huan Yu had been struck by Chen Chang Sheng's short sword twice, his right shoulder was slightly caved in; blood was overflowing and his complexion was abnormally pale.

A blade's edge is unmatched, while a staff is but a blunt weapon. Exchanging three sword strikes for two blows from a staff, no matter from which perspective this was looked at, with the last exchange, it should be Zhuang Huan Yu who had gained the upper hand.

If Zhuang Huan Yu's opponent was anyone else, suffering those three sword strikes, they would have sustained heavy injuries and be unable to continue battling.

Chen Chang Sheng did not collapse.

Zhuang Huan Yu wanted to pit manoeuvre against manoeuvre with him; sword against sword; True Essence against True Essence.

Chen Chang Sheng's counter was even more severe, directly exchanging move for move; sword for sword; wound for wound.

This was the method Liang Ban Hu had used against Tang Thirty-Six, a strategy formulated by Gou Han Shi.

It had been used by Chen Chang Sheng against Zhuang Huan Yu in this critical match.

Chen Chang Sheng had always been someone that is willing to learn and was good at learning. Not to mention, for him to dare to use this method, it showed that he had an absolute confidence in his True Essence and defence, that they were, at the very least, stronger than Zhuang Huan Yu's.

Zhuang Huan Yu didn't collapse either, though his complexion was now extremely pallid.

Their bodies were covered in blood; separated by a distance of over 30 metres, they silently observed each other.

It was silent within the Tower of Purging Dust.

The personages by the second floor window also maintained silence.

This match naturally wasn't much to them, but Chen Chang Sheng and Zhuang Huan Yu had displayed composure and courage that far exceeded those of their age group, this made these personages feel slightly moved; their current silence, was possibly a display of respect towards them.

Silence, also represented tension.

Which of them was the winner?

Outside of the tower, it was also silent.

The examinees outside of the tower were actually even more

nervous than those within, being even more anxious to know as to who had won the match.

From after Chen Chang Sheng and Zhuang Huan Yu's entrance into the tower, their gazes had remained upon that tightly closed door.

As with the many matches that had already happened, the examinees couldn't see what was happening inside the tower, they could only rely upon the sounds emitted from the tower to guess what was happening.

The tower's silencing array had frequently lost its effectiveness from the third round onwards, this was because the participating examinees were increasingly strong and their battles increasingly intense.

This match was also as such, not long after the door closed, the examinees heard a shrill and forlorn sound of the air being split apart, they knew that it was the sound of a sword, but didn't know as to if it was Zhuang Huan Yu's sword, or Chen Chang Sheng's. After that, they heard a muffled sound, as if someone was striking a bell within the tower, someone speculated that it was probably the sound of a fist imbued with True Essence.

Events following this became rather strange.

This was because the tower suddenly became quiet, but outside of the tower, there were the sounds of cicadas crying and the temperature even rose slightly, as if they had entered Summer.

After this, the cloudless skies above suddenly poured down with rain, that rain didn't touch a single inch of land outside of the tower, only falling within, looking akin to a waterfall.

Then, the sound of swords once again arose, unceasingly, until finally, everything became quiet.

The match had probably ended, who had won and who had lost?

The three people from Orthodox Academy were the most anxious, the atmosphere around the woodlands was stifling.

Xuan Yuan Po stared at the tightly closed door with wide-open eyes, constantly clenching his hands together, his forehead covered in sweat.

Luo Luo had her eyes closed, her small hands were clenched into fists in front of her, quietly praying for Chen Chang Sheng.

Tang Thirty-Six continuously paced to and fro, with his hands behind his back, his lips faintly moving, muttering something. He hadn't asked Chen Chang Sheng what his plan was, or where did his confidence come from, he knew that Chen Chang Sheng must have some sort of preparation for this match, but he also clearly understood how strong Zhuang Huan Yu is – Zhuang Huan Yu is the senior pupil of Heavenly Academy and a figure he had always sought to surpass.

Only by being slightly closer, could one properly make out the words he was quietly muttering to himself: "Too optimistic... too optimistic, we trust him too much, how could he possibly win?"

How could he possibly win? You definitely have to win this you stupid person, but, how can you possible win?”

It was at this moment, that the tower’s door was pushed open.

All the examinees turned their sights towards it.

Luo Luo opened her eyes, full of hope and concern.

Tang Thirty-Six stilled his steps and his muttering, but he didn’t look, he didn’t dare to look.

The first person to walk out of the tower, was Chen Chang Sheng.

His body was covered in blood, his feet were bare and his clothing in tatters. Sand plastered his entire body, causing him to resemble a beggar even more closely than in the previous rounds.

The paved area remained silent, because it still couldn’t be confirmed as to who had won this match.

Guan Fei Bai was the first to walk out of the tower after a similarly intense match against Zhe Xiu, yet he had lost.

It was at this tense moment that Chen Chang Sheng suddenly turned around and headed back into the tower.

The duel had already ended and he had already exited the tower, why did he turn around again? Everyone was stunned, not understanding what was going on.

Not long after, he once again came out, this time, he had a pair of boots in his hands.

A brand new pair of boots.

A weird cry suddenly erupted from the match grounds; that weird cry was from Tang Thirty-Six.

He had seemingly not looked, but in truth, he had kept watch using his peripheral vision.

He continued crying out weirdly while rushing towards Chen Chang Sheng.

Luo Luo let out a long, drawn-out breath and lightly patted her chest, her face was full of joy and remnants of the previous stress.

Xuan Yuan Po didn't understand, scratching his head and asked: "What's going on?"

Luo Luo replied: "Sir has won."

Chapter 166 – This Also Works

At this type of time, to still remember the boots he had left behind, made it obvious that Chen Chang Sheng had won.

It was indeed as such.

Zhuang Huan Yu subsequently didn't make an appearance, a clergy member of Li Palace appeared instead, announcing the match's result.

Under the shocked gazes of the other examinees, Chen Chang Sheng carried his boots while bare footed, slowly walking down the stone steps.

At this moment, Tang Thirty-Six had already rushed to Chen Chang Sheng's location, he supported Chen Chang Sheng while extending his hand at the same time to take hold of the boots.

Chen Chang Sheng felt a little humbled, saying: "You're being too courteous."

Though he said that, he didn't refuse Tang Thirty-Six's support, this was because he had sustained fairly heavy injuries; though he had received treatment through saintly radiance while within the tower, he was still feeling very weak.

Tang Thirty-Six sighed and said: "From now on, it seems I will only have the qualification to help carry your shoes, how can I not

grasp the opportunity to gain some favour?”

This was a famous adage from the Zhou Empire.

Tang Thirty-Six was sighing, brooding, but his eyes were full of elation.

By this time, Xuan Yuan Po and Luo Luo had also arrived to greet him.

Within the Tower of Purging Dust.

Zhuang Huan Yu lay upon the stretcher, his right shoulder was slight caved-in and one side of his body was covered in blood. His pallid lips gently trembled and his hands were tightly clenched into fists.

The room on the second floor was also very quiet, the important figures were all silent, not knowing how they should evaluate this match.

The Grand Examination had already seen a lot of matches, Chen Chang Sheng and Zhuang Huan Yu were not the strongest, neither was their match the most intense.

If it were to be in terms of intensity or perhaps severity, then it had to be the silent battle between Zhe Xiu and Guan Fei Bai; again, Chen Chang Sheng and Zhuang Huan Yu's match wasn't the most spectacular, that belonged to the match of Li Mountain, between Qi Jian and Liang Ban Hu.

But this match was full of twists and turns; Chen Chang Sheng had actually entered initial meditation a second time, breaking Zhuang Huan Yu's incredibly stable performance, making it extremely memorable.

Outside of the tower, the entire area was blanketed in silence, the gazes of everyone fell upon the woodlands

No one knew how Chen Chang Sheng had won, leading to a lot of speculation, making everyone feel all the more astonished.

Zhuang Huan Yu is Heavenly Academy's pride, the strongest from the Capital's schools; even he, couldn't stop Chen Chang Sheng. Could it be, that His Eminence's declaration that day at Li Palace, really would become reality? Could Chen Chang Sheng really take first place upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination?

Flowing water streamed on past. The disciples of Li Mountain that were by the streambank remained quiet for a very long time.

Guan Fei Bai stared at Chen Chang Sheng, whom was walking to the poplar tree under the support of Luo Luo, watching him sit down by the tree, and said, with much emotion: "He is worthy of his fame after all."

"In terms of cultivation and battling, Chen Chang Sheng is not famous, neither is he famed for luck, thus, it makes him appear all the more extraordinary."

Gou Han Shi looked at Chen Chang Sheng, whom was currently sitting against the poplar tree with his eyes closed and resting.

Gou Han Shi silently contemplated, a youth that didn't know to cultivate or battle, using only a few short months, had managed to mature to such a stage, just how much time and effort did he put into it?

Even if it was to be described as “burning his life away”, it would be appropriate, but doing so much just for obtaining first place in the Grand Examination, is it worth it?

The silence outside of the tower was broken by the sound of coughing from the woodlands.

Chen Chang Sheng leaned against the poplar tree, coughing uncontrollably, evidently in a lot of pain. Following each cough, the sword wounds on his chest would once again split open, overflowing with blood.

Relying upon an indifference to death, he had obtained victory over Zhuang Huan Yu with much difficulty, but the price he had paid was extremely great, it was obvious that his wounds would not recover before the end of the examination.

Luo Luo helped bandage his wounds in a rather flustered manner; Tang Thirty-Six searched for medicine in their belongings as instructed by Chen Chang Sheng.

Xuan Yuan Po carried over a large bowl of clean water as Tang

Thirty-Six finally found the medicine Chen Chang Sheng required.

Chen Chang Sheng swallowed a large quantity of medicinal pills with the water, he then wearily closed his eyes and continued to rest.

Luo Luo watched his pallid face, feeling a little unable to control her emotions, she wanted to say something, but in the end, didn't.

Not mentioning that he might be matched against Gou Han Shi soon, right now, with Chen Chang Sheng's current state and injuries, any of the examinees that were participating in the examination could easily strike him down.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to say anything that could persuade him to stop battling.

Neither could Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po.

Even the Li Palace clergy inside of the tower, who had seen his injuries, couldn't bring themselves to persuade him to withdraw from the tournament.

That's right, it wasn't that they couldn't bear to watch him continue battling after suffering such heavy injuries, but instead, they couldn't bring themselves to accept seeing him give up after enduring to this point.

Chen Chang Sheng will not cease battling, neither would the

duelling phase pause due to his injuries.

The duelling continued, Gou Han Shi entered the tower and as usual, akin to the tranquillity of vitalising Spring rain; he defeated his opponent for this round, that girl from Holy Maiden Peak.

What made the group from Orthodox Academy feel all the more uneasy, was that even at this final stage, Gou Han Shi's opponent remained uninjured.

This type of flawless control represented an absolute advantage, after Tian Hai Sheng Xue's withdrawal from the tournament, the difference in ability between Gou Han Shi and the other examinees was vast to the point of making people feel despair.

Orthodox Academy could only place their hopes upon Zhe Xiu, who was soon to enter the stage.

The wolf-tribe youth that is listed third upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; according to the previous drawing of names, if he was to defeat his opponent for this round, he would then be matched against Gou Han Shi.

In truth, amongst all the examinees present, he and Luo Luo were probably the only ones that could present a degree of threat towards Gou Han Shi; Luo Luo won't be matched against him, therefore, Zhe Xiu was the only choice.

Zhe Xiu's opponent for this round, was a youthful officer from Star Seizer Academy.

He didn't directly enter the tower, but instead, headed for the woodlands.

Seeing this scene, the examinees felt rather shocked, remembering that Tang Thirty-Six had previously sought Zhe Xiu, they couldn't help being curious as to what this was about.

Zhe Xiu arrived at the woodlands, looked at Tang Thirty-Six with an expressionless face and said: "Money."

Hearing this, Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po's expressions changed; it was only now, that they believed Tang Thirty-Six's previous words to be true.

Even Chen Chang Sheng became wide-eyed.

So it seems, the wolf-tribe youth that was renowned for being cold-blooded and solitary, really is a money-grubber?

Tang Thirty-Six felt especially provoked by this, angrily saying, in a low tone: "You even want money for this type of opponent?"

Zhe Xiu remained expressionless, looking perhaps, even a little vacant, and asked: "Why can't I?"

"Can't you win easily?" Tang Thirty-Six continued angrily: "If I don't give you money, don't tell me you won't be able to win against that fellow?"

Zhe Xiu thought for a moment, then said: “But you want me to fight Gou Han Shi.”

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “We’ll discuss the price in the next round.”

Zhe Xiu shook his head and said: “To battle Gou Han Shi, I first have to win this match, therefore, you have to give me money.”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him like as if he was seeing a freak; finding that Zhe Xiu didn’t have any intention of changing his mind, Tang Thirty-Six could only admit defeat, taking out a banknote from his sleeve and handing it over.

Zhe Xiu looked at the banknote, being very satisfied with the value written upon it; thus, he did a rare nod and said: “I will fight well.”

Finishing those words, he left the woodlands and headed towards the tower.

Luo Luo was wide-eyed as she stared at Tang Thirty-Six and asked: “This also works?”

Xuan Yuan Po stared at Zhe Xiu’s slightly lonely looking back, drew in a breath of cold air and said: “This also works?”

Chapter 167 – Two Drawn-Out Matches

Some of the people present, saw Tang Thirty-Six hand over a piece of paper to Zhe Xiu, but no one imagined that it would be a banknote, this was because the impression that wolf-tribe youth left on others, could in no way be associated with something like money; just as with Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po, even having witnessed this with their own eyes, it was hard to believe.

Zhe Xiu entered the Tower of Purging Dust.

Zhe Xiu exited the Tower of Purging Dust.

His opponent didn't leave the tower. In the same way as Gou Han Shi had, he obtained an uncontested victory, but this similarity was only in terms of its results, its process was a lot more contentious than Gou Han Shi's, because his opponent, once again, had been sent out of the Education Palace after being heavily injured.

The examinees gazes followed him as he walked down the steps and arrived at the woodlands where the group from Orthodox Academy were.

Tang Thirty-Six was a little speechless, saying: "You're using the status of a student from Star Seizer Academy to participate, and even now, you're using the false name of Zhang Ting Tao; that gentleman can be considered your fellow-student, did you have to fight so mercilessly?"

Zhe Xiu remained quiet for a while, it seemed he couldn't really understand why Tang Thirty-Six was so concerned about this, he then said: "I said I will fight well."

Tang Thirty-Six's banknote made him very satisfied, thus, he did a rare nod in conveyance and promised that he would fight well. For the wolf-tribe youth who couldn't understand, neither cared to understand about human relations, fighting well means exerting his full strength in fighting, the outcome for his opponent was only to be expected.

"What are you here for?"

The gazes of all the examinees congregated upon the woodlands, this made Tang Thirty-Six feel a degree of pressure, he didn't want to let others know of the deal made between Orthodox Academy and Zhe Xiu. It didn't have anything to do with reputation or such, but was simply because he wanted to preserve this secret, the secret that Zhe Xiu could be bought out with money.

Zhe Xiu was currently the equivalent of a mercenary for Orthodox Academy, for such a powerful mercenary, it was naturally best to ensure no one knew of this.

"To discuss the price," said Zhe Xiu.

Tang Thirty-Six understood that he meant the next match.

Without any surprises, Zhe Xiu was matched against Gou Han

Shi.

Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po were inspecting the grass on the ground with their heads hanging, without saying anything, they were using this action to hide their embarrassment.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't join them, that's because this was his own affair, if it was to bring about derision afterwards, then he believed the target of that derision should be himself and not Tang Thirty-Six.

“The thing that you want, I can't guarantee if... if I have it or not, but I will do my best to obtain it for you,” he looked at Zhe Xiu while saying this.

Zhe Xiu stared at him straight in the eyes and said, in a detached tone: “You must have it.”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “If I do, I'll give it to you.”

Zhe Xiu remained quiet for a long while before saying: “I accept.”

He then looked towards Tang Thirty-Six, remaining quiet again for a long time, then said: “Three times?”

Tang Thirty-Six was startled, before finally regaining his senses, strongly suppressing his glee and calmly said: “No problem.”

Zhe Xiu once again nodded his head towards him in conveyance, he then turned around and headed beyond the crowd.

“It seems that fellow only knows how to kill and doesn’t know how to bargain,” said Tang Thirty-Six emotionally as he watched Zhe Xiu’s back.

The price for battling Gou Han Shi was only three times the price for battling that Star Seizer Academy student, Zhe Xiu’s asking price really did make him feel rather surprised.

He then thought of something, turning to look at Chen Chang Sheng, frowning as he asked: “Do you know what he wants?”

It was obvious that being very short on money was only partially the reason why the wolf-tribe youth was willing to help Orthodox Academy, the most important reason was that he wanted something from Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng gave Luo Luo a glance and said: “I can more or less guess what he wants, I just can’t be sure if I can help him or not.”

The last match of the top 8, happened between Luo Luo and that young scholar from Scholartree Manor, Zhong Hui.

Living up to his rank of being ninth upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds; while inside the tower, Zhong Hui displayed an extremely formidable True Essence cultivation and sword ability,

he successfully persevered... for about the time it took for half a stick of incense to burn.

The Li Palace clergyman announced the result, Zhong Hui silently left the tower.

Staring at that young scholar's slightly forlorn looking back, Luo Luo didn't feel anything in particular, quietly watching the entrance, awaiting the next opponent's arrival.

She didn't leave the tower, she had requested to fight the top 4's first match, the personages up on the second floor had to at least give her some face.

The door to the tower closed and after a short period, once again opened.

Hearing that creak, Luo Luo ran over, then carefully locked her arms around her opponent's arm.

Her opponent for this round is Chen Chang Sheng.

The floor that had been washed out by the rainwater, had remnants of wet sand left behind, the stone steps near the perimeter wall in comparison, were relatively clean and much drier.

Luo Luo supported Chen Chang Sheng as they went over to sit upon the stone steps, she then passed over some clean water and

had him drink a mouthful, before saying: “How much longer till the medicine starts to show its effect?”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the gold wire that that was wrapped around his left ring finger and said: “It’s already slightly better, you don’t have to worry, if it’s still not enough later on, I’ll think of something else.”

Luo Luo said: “Then you should rest a little more, Sir.”

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the second floor, wondering if this was appropriate.

The Tower of Purging Dust is the arena for duels in the Grand Examination, examinees that entered the tower had their concentration focused upon battling, rarely having the opportunity to observe the tower’s appearance.

At this time, he could have a good look.

Yet in the end, he still felt a little uneasy.

“Someone will say something won’t they?” he asked, while looking at Luo Luo.

Luo Luo wanted to say that she didn’t care what others said, but thinking of his cautious personality, she lightly rolled her eyes and then said: “Then let’s just talk to each other.”

What should they talk about? Has the great banyan tree at the academy become even larger? Can you still see the convenience store at the entrance to the Hundred Blossom Lane when standing atop the tree's branches? How thick was the snow at the academy last winter?

“Sir, how did you win against Zhuang Huan Yu?” Luo Luo asked a question everyone was interested on.

Chen Chang Sheng gave it a thought, recounting to her in detail as to what happened in the previous match, without missing anything significant.

Luo Luo was naturally taken aback, saying, as if she was still fearful: “Luckily there was that spell of rain...”

Chen Chang Sheng nodded, thinking back on it, if it wasn't for that cold, icy rain from the heavens, even if he hadn't burned to death from the Star Brilliance, he would have been heavily injured by the high temperatures.

That spell of rain, where did it come from?

“The Education Palace is within His Holiness' Green Leaf World, only His Holiness can make it rain here.”

It was unknown as to what Luo Luo had thought of, she remained quiet for a long time, then said: “Sir, this seems to be getting more

and more complicated.”

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent, if the person that instigated that spell of rain really was His Holiness, what was the explanation for it?

Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy are targets of nurture for the tradition faction of the Orthodoxy.

Everyone knew that the Orthodoxy's tradition faction, or more specifically, those figures that supported the Imperial Chen Clan, were opposed to Her Divine Majesty and His Holiness.

Why would His Holiness help him? Or more accurately speaking, save him?

Everyone upon the continent knew that both, the academy's new students, and His Eminence's declaration, concealed a lot of problems.

As one of the involved parties, Chen Chang Sheng was obviously aware of this, but he had never deliberated over this before.

Firstly, he didn't want to concern himself with it; his aim in the end, is first place in the Grand Examination, the aims of those personages within the Capital were unrelated to him.

Secondly, he couldn't understand; the thoughts of those personages wasn't something a youth like him could guess.

“At the very least, from the current look of things, it will be of a benefit to me,” replied Chen Chang Sheng in a reassuring tone, while looking at Luo Luo, whom had a stern expression on her face.

Luo Luo said: “I think we might be able to borrow the momentum.”

Chen Chang Sheng couldn't quite understand, asking: “Borrow what momentum?”

Luo Luo's gaze fell upon the sword wounds on his chest, she then said: “In the match to come, try your best to take risks.”

Chen Chang Sheng understood her meaning.

With Luo Luo's original intention, she definitely wouldn't have suggested this course of action, but since Chen Chang Sheng absolutely had to take first upon the First Banner, this was something that had to be done.

Neither she nor Chen Chang Sheng knew what those personages were thinking, but they knew that those personages had already done something.

A lot of important personages wanted Chen Chang Sheng to fail, but a lot of important personages also didn't want him to die.

If His Holiness could cause a spell of rain in the Education Palace, then he could bring about even more rain.

Thus, Chen Chang Sheng should take risks, seeking life in the midst of death, only with this, could he borrow those personage's momentum or perhaps, once again borrow His Holiness' rain.

The so called "momentum", meant going with the flow.

Luo Luo felt a little uneasy, saying: "But you absolutely have to pay attention to your own safety."

Chen Chang Sheng extended his hand and rubbed her head, saying: "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

Luo Luo's mood was a little downcast, saying: "I'm sorry, I haven't been of much help today."

She had pleaded before His Holiness, The Pope, for an entire night, in order to participate in the Grand Examination.

Rankings were meaningless for her, what she wanted to do, was to help forge the way forwards for Chen Chang Sheng, it was only because she had defeated Zhong Hui in the previous round, that Chen Chang Sheng could currently sit upon the stone steps and rest, not needing to face against Scholartree Manor's supreme skills with a heavily injured body.

Yet, in her eyes, this wasn't of any great significance.

Her aim had been Tian Hai Sheng Xue and Gou Han Shi.

Tian Hai Sheng Xue had withdrawn due to her, but there still remained Gou Han Shi.

It was very peaceful within the Tower of Purging Dust.

But it was very lively outside of the tower, that's because no one cared about the results to the match that was currently happening inside; everyone knew what Her Highness would do.

The examinees were all in groups of two or three, debating over the previous matches or possible rankings, speculating over Chen Chang Sheng's actual strength and how many moves could he persevere for against Gou Han Shi.

However, as time passed by, the tower continued to remain peaceful and the door remained closed, the examinees began to feel restless with some of them even starting to get drowsy.

Guan Fei Bai looked towards the tightly shut door of the tower and said, rather angrily: "Where's the reason in this?"

Liang Ban Hu looked towards the woodlands, shaking his head and sighing: "Even someone like Tang Tang is feeling ashamed, how could Her Highness be like this?"

Gou Han Shi remained silent, upon thinking how Orthodox Academy was willing to use any method to help Chen Chang Sheng obtain first upon the First Banner, it was likely that the final

match wasn't going to be that simple.

At the woodlands, Xuan Yuan Po crouched upon the ground, unknown as to what he was looking at, previously, it was Luo Luo that crouched alongside him, now, it had changed to Tang Thirty-Six.

Countless gazes fell upon them, making them feel rather pressured, they couldn't bring themselves to raise their heads nor converse with each other, all they could do was to crouch there, mumbling out a song to themselves.

“What is this?”

Within the tower, by the second floor's window, an Archbishop of the Holy Church stared at the two youngsters that were atop the steps, his expression was unsightly to the extreme.

Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo were talking; master and disciple, closely together, conversing private matters, the scene was actually rather pleasant, very innocent and emotive.

The problem was, this is the Tower of Purging Dust, a stately arena for the Grand Examination's duels, it wasn't Orthodox Academy's lakeside, neither was it the Hundred Herb Garden's trellis for melons.

Xue Xing Chuan lightly frowned, saying: “This... isn't appropriate is it?”

Prince Chen Liu felt like laughing, but in consideration of the others that were present, he stifled his laughter.

Mo Yu was expressionless, calmly watching Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo, yet her brows revealed a hint of impatience.

Everyone knew what Her Highness' intention was, she wanted to make this match a period of rest and recovery for Chen Chang Sheng, thus, the longer it was, the better. But the entire continent was nervously awaiting the final rankings for the Grand Examination, was the entire world supposed to wait however long she and Chen Chang Sheng wanted to rest for?

The most troubling thing was that the Grand Examination didn't have any rules or regulations on this matter. Who said participants had to immediately fight to the death the moment they entered the stage? Who said opponents cannot respect each other's talents and converse a few words?

Luo Luo and Chen Chang Sheng had countless reasons or perhaps excuses to extend the time, changing the duel into nothing more than a conversation for them.

That Archbishop of the Holy Church angrily said: "Request Her Highness to hasten their match, if they don't make a move, then judge the both of them negatively, directly eliminating them from the tournament."

A Li Palace clergyman accurately conveyed the Archbishop's wishes to the two youths that were currently talking atop the stone steps.

Luo Luo was outraged, saying: “Can’t you see we’re currently accumulating momentum? Who dares to eliminate us?”

That Li Palace clergyman wanted to grimace, wanted to ask Her Highness if she thought the entire world was blind. What type of accumulation of momentum would accumulate for an hour? Accumulating to the point where two people are shoulder to shoulder? But he didn’t dare to say anything.

A creak resounded, the window to that second floor room opened for the first time.

Xue Xing Chuan arrived at the arena grounds, arrived before Luo Luo and said something in hushed tones with a small smile on his face.

Luo Luo still refused to get up and leave.

Chen Chang Sheng said: “I’ve more or less rested enough, let’s head out together, don’t cause trouble for His Grace.”

Luo Luo was most obedient to his words and also knew that they couldn’t appropriate the tower for too long, she helped Chen Chang Sheng rise, then headed out of the tower together.

Xue Xing Chuan watched the two youths as they left, unable to stop himself shaking his head, evincing his sense of helplessness.

With this, the first match of the Grand Examination's top 4 came to an end.

Her Highness, in line with what everyone expected, directly conceded, at the same time she had gained an extremely valuable period of recovery for Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng entered the finals for the Grand Examination.

He was another step closer to that aim which had been ridiculed by the entire continent.

But the entire process was seemingly a little outrageous.

Yet, he didn't care.

Neither did Luo Luo.

The closer the duelling got to its end, the faster it would proceed. This was because the participants would become increasingly strong; even if their difference in strength was only slight, determining the victor would still be within a few manoeuvres. After the second round, the time required for each match became extremely short, otherwise, it wouldn't have been possible to reach the final stage so quickly.

Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo's match, had wasted a full hour, taking longer than the previous ten matches combined, of course, everyone knew this was uncommon, and that only someone like

Her Highness, with an uncommon status, could do this.

Yet, while everyone was thinking that this would probably be the longest match in the examination for this year, the second match, between Gou Han Shi and Zhe Xiu, once again brought about an immense surprise for them all.

This was because the match continued for a very long time, and judging by its current state, it seemed it will still continue, quite possibly surpassing an hour in length.

Hearing the horrifying sounds that would occasionally leak out from the tower, Tang Thirty-Six's expression became ever more sombre, the respect in his eyes became ever stronger.

He turned around and looked at Chen Chang Sheng, gravely saying: "Apart from your life, whatever that wolf-child wants you to give him, you should just give it to him."

Chapter 168 – Battling Out Your Own Price

Time went by inexorably. Outside of the tower, the examinees had expressions that became sterner by the moment, while the alarm within their eyes became ever stronger, unknown as to when a winner will be determined for this match.

After Tian Hai Sheng Xue's departure, Gou Han Shi and Zhe Xiu were considered, unquestionably, by the examinees present, to be the strongest two; no matter how it was viewed, this match should not have continued for so long.

The time used for this battle was protracted to the point that the match between Chen Chang Sheng and Luo Luo couldn't even compare.

Sounds transmitted from the tower continued ceaselessly, sometimes being akin to thunder, other times akin to a tidal wave clapping against the air; the deep-blue skies above would frequently display beautiful, billowy clouds, this was a reaction of True Essence clashing with the miniature world.

Such displays and sounds were proof of just how intense the match that was happening within the tower, currently was.

Outside of the tower, it was quiet, everyone looked at the tightly closed entrance, listening to the sounds leaking out; the mood was very tense, unknown as to what the current state was within the tower.

Once the time finally surpassed an hour, even the three disciples from Li Mountain began to reveal signs of worry on their faces.

After having said those words to Chen Chang Sheng, Tang Thirty-Six didn't say anything else, his expression became increasingly sombre and his eyes revealed an ever greater amount

of solemnity, he stood increasingly straight, as if he wanted to use this to signify respect for a certain person.

An hour had passed, the battle continued, Xuan Yuan Po looked towards Tang Thirty-Six and asked: “Do you know anything? There won’t be a problem will there?”

Tang Thirty-Six remained quiet for a moment, then said: “That wolf-child is currently risking his life.”

In the previous match, Zhe Xiu took the banknote and then nodded his head in satisfaction, expressing that he would fight well, thus, he beat that Star Seizer Academy student, who was nominally his fellow-student, to the point of having them sent out of the Education Palace.

Before the start of this current match, he didn’t say anything, but reality showed that he was currently pitting his life against Gou Han Shi.

There are many different ways of battling, fighting well is one method, risking your life is another.

No matter how strong Zhe Xiu is, against Gou Han Shi, who had already completed his Ethereal Opening, there existed a difficult to transcend difference in terms of cultivation level, if he didn’t risk his life in battle, how could he possibly sustain for such a long time?

Chen Chang Sheng had remained silent all this time.

He clearly understood the reason why Tang Thirty-Six suddenly said those words to him.

The fighting spirit displayed by Zhe Xiu, alongside what he was sacrificing, were obviously not something that could be bought by just a flimsy banknote, a hired mercenary has started to risk their life, proving he really wants that “thing”.

“Wolves are one of the animals in this world with the most perseverance and endurance.”

Luo Luo listened to the recurrent sounds that were leaking out from the tower, her small face revealed a pained expression and she said: “When Zhe Xiu hunted and killed his first demon warrior, he was only eleven years of age, that time he pursued the demon warrior on the wintry snow plains for three months, it wasn’t until that demon was exhausted that he could successfully complete the hunt.”

Chen Chang Sheng mused to himself that the demon race’s patience and endurance really was tenacious to the extreme.

What he didn’t expect was that this was only the story’s most dazzling outward appearance.

Momentarily after, Luo Luo continued: “But who could have known that the hidden ailment within his body would suddenly flare-up at that moment, coupled with having not eaten for over 10 days and only consuming snow water, it’s not an exaggeration to say he was only a step away from dying, if it weren’t for the demon

warrior giving up and collapsing, the person that died would perhaps have been Zhe Xiu instead.”

The woodlands were covered in silence.

Tang Thirty-Six looked at the tightly closed entrance to the tower and said, with complex feelings: “Within the wolf-child’s lexicon, there aren’t the expressions “give up” or “mercy”, if it wasn’t for the fact that space within the tower is limited and the methods of battling are restricted, were he and Gou Han Shi to fight to the death in the real world, it really would be hard to determine who would be able to persevere till the end.”

Chen Chang Sheng turned his gaze towards the tower, remaining silent.

Above that circular tower, the clouds in the deep-blue skies overhead had been teared into billowy wisps; sporadically, forlorn whistling sounds could be heard, unknown as to if it was the wind roaring, or a wolf howling, with each reverberation being startling.

His gaze fell upon the door, it seemed as if he could peer into the tower itself, seeing the expressionless Zhe Xiu battling against the silent Gou Han Shi, with the blood upon Zhe Xiu’s fingers slowly trickling onto the floor.

Standing at the scene of the Grand Examination, it was as if he could see the past, a frail looking youth silently trekked within the blizzard, his illness-ridden body was extremely weak, swaying back

and forth, on the verge of toppling.

But upon that youth's tender looking face, there was no signs of fear or the wish to retreat, he stared at the demon warrior's hulking figure in front of him, waiting for his opponent to collapse before he did, his eyes full of vengeance and tenacity; looking upon this, he seemed to be a wolf, precisely because he was the wolf-tribe youth.

As Tang Thirty-Six had said, if Zhe Xiu and Gou Han Shi were to have a battle to the death in the real world, it would be hard to know who could persevere in the end, alas, the Education Palace is a miniature world and not the real world, thus, the one to persevere in the end was still Gou Han Shi; this disciple from Li Mountain who had come from poverty, yet had read the scriptures in their entirety.

A creaking sound penetrated the ears and the door to the tower, which had been tightly closed, slowly opened; Gou Han Shi slowly walked out of the tower, arriving atop the stone steps, he painfully coughed twice, his complexion was a little pale and his steps, a little sluggish.

Guan Fei Bai and Liang Ban Hu went up to receive him while Qi Jian anxiously searched for medicine in their luggage.

Zhe Xiu also came out of the tower, but he didn't walk out himself; he was carried out.

Blood continuously trickled off from the stretcher's edges, giving a sight that would strike fear into all observers. His pallid face remained expressionless, seeming very tranquil, his eyes were tightly shut and it couldn't be seen as to what he was thinking at

this moment.

He was akin to a wolf, silently and persistently clashing with Gou Han Shi for over an hour, causing Gou Han Shi to suffer fairly heavy injuries, alas, he had also paid a high price for this.

With his current injuries, he definitely cannot continue battling, and it was possibly even life-threatening.

He should have been taken out of the Education Palace in order to receive treatment, yet, previously, in the tower, when the presiding Li Palace clergyman was about to organise this, they had been rebuffed by this youth's apathetic attitude and insistence, in the end, they could only carry him out of the tower.

To be able to drive Gou Han Shi to this state, Zhe Xiu managed to garner fear and respect from all of the examinees present, but of the two words "fear" and "respect", "fear" was the predominant feeling; gazing at the blood dripping stretcher and he, who was laid upon it, everyone remained silent, with no one going up to offer condolences or express concern.

He had used the identity of a student from Star Seizer Academy to enter the competition, but had directly crippled that fellow-student from the same academy, currently, the academy could no longer concern itself with him.

The Li Palace clergy carried the stretcher while looking at the examinees who were outside of the tower, they didn't know where they should carry him to.

It was at this moment, Chen Chang Sheng held onto the poplar tree and stood up with much difficulty.

Luo Luo understood his intent and patted Xuan Yuan Po's back,

indicating that he should go and bring the stretcher over, Xuan Yuan Po didn't dare to have any objections and went ahead, receiving the stretcher with a single hand.

The stretcher reached the woodlands, Zhe Xiu calmly lay upon it, his complexion pale and his body covered with blood, he couldn't move nor speak, but he opened his eyes, seeming to be very tranquil.

A tearing sound could be heard and Xuan Yuan Po began to bandage him.

Chen Chang Sheng fed him medicine.

Luo Luo looked at him with complex feelings.

Tang Thirty-Six sighed and said: "Why make it such a bitter fight?"

Zhe Xiu looked at him with an expressionless face and replied: "Add money."

Chapter 169 – Academic Exam Results And The Mountain Climbing Staff

Located within the Green Leaf World, the Education Palace did not distinguish night and day, those inside also had difficulty sensing the flow of time and didn't know that outside, in the real world, it was already the next day.

The time was near noon, peddlers grasped the opportunity to eagerly hawk their wares.

Using the stone pillars as a perimeter, beyond that line, it was exceedingly lively, with the fragrance of osmanthus jelly being the most distinct amongst all the foods present.

The populace that had come to view the Grand Examination surrounded the outer perimeter of Li Palace, discussing the latest news that would constantly come out from the palace. These people couldn't see the thrilling scenes first-hand, but this didn't affect their mood, the atmosphere was still buoyant, it had to be said that this was also attributable to the work of the storytellers present.

On the streets outside of Li Palace, every hundred or so metres apart there would be a tea store, before each store there would inevitably be an ordinary table with a storyteller dressed in either a cheongsam or a padded jacket stood beside it, their spittle spraying in all directions, coupled with their arms and legs gesticulating incessantly as they unremittingly gave accounts of what was currently happening within the Education Palace.

It was unknown as to whom within Li Palace these storytellers,

and the store owners backing them, were acquainted with; what had just happened in the Grand Examination would, at the next moment, become the contents of what the storyteller was recounting, with the details actually being more or less accurate.

In the Southwestern corner, there was a comparatively quiet teahouse, its decoration was rather refined, yet today, this teahouse couldn't escape from the dowdiness either, specially inviting a storyteller to sit in the main area and also spending a large sum to acquire the latest news from Li Palace.

All that could be seen was that sharp looking middle-aged storyteller smacking the table and saying: "It is said that the River Qu's serene clarity can reflect a person. The examinees all displayed their various abilities; some stepping upon the river itself, others becoming a streaking cloud, leaving that youth from Orthodox Academy as the last."

They continued: "For a time, both shores were quiet as can be, with everyone wanting to see how that youth would cross the river, yet who could have expected; they only heard a single cry from the edge of the horizon and the White Crane came hither."

Talking up to this segment, the storyteller once again heavily smacked upon wood, shocking the patrons out of their attentive stupor before slowly continuing the narrative: "At that time, there were close to a hundred examinees upon both shores that had been shocked to the point of having their eyes and mouths wide open; just as with how your esteemed selves have been startled by this simple old man, the examinees had been startled by that White Crane."

The storyteller continued: “Why? That’s because at the next moment, that youth from Orthodox Academy actually lifted himself up and clutched on, sitting upon the crane’s back without so much as a word, soaring upwards with the clouds, and headed towards the opposing shore; an actual case of riding a crane down South of the river; tis scene, such peculiarity!”

The teahouse erupted in a chaotic wave of chatter.

That storyteller smiled and said: “Your esteemed selves need not debate this. It should be known that for the examinees who are participating in the Grand Examination, whether be within their respective sects or academies, they would have definitely seen sagely birds and strange beasts before, yet why were they so shocked?”

They continued: “This is because no one had thought that you can use this method to cross the river; yet, what made them all the more shocked was that the White Crane wasn’t just any White Crane, but was the White Crane from our Capital’s Divine General of the Eastern Decree’s estate.”

Sounds of discussion within the teahouse became all the more rambunctious. A lot of the people from the Capital knew that the Divine General’s estate has a White Crane, but sightings of it had been rare for the past few years, some also thought of that marriage contract which had been gossiped of intensely; they couldn’t stop themselves being very curious as to why that White Crane would be willing to carry that youth over.

“If your esteemed selves still remember, then you should know

that the White Crane had followed young Miss Xu to Holy Maiden Peak in the South. Why would it suddenly appear at the distant Capital? Could it be that Miss Xu really has accepted that youth to be her fiancé? Then what type of reaction should those distinguished disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect have?”

Having narrated up to this point, the storyteller lightly coughed twice, then raised their cup and took a few sips of warm tea. The patrons of the teahouse understood the meaning of this action. Though a few of them angrily complained that this was yesterday's story and questioned how could it still be used today to extort money, the majority still obediently took out some gratuity money.

The storyteller saw the amount of copper coins within the tea tray and was very pleased. Clearing their throat, they once again began resuming their account of the Grand Examination.

All the patrons listened attentively, with no one noticing that a middle-aged person wearing a large conical hat, upon finishing the remnants of their tea, left the teahouse.

That middle-aged person's hat was worn extremely low, making it difficult to clearly see their visage, upon leaving the teahouse, they entered the streets and mingled with the crowd, taking but a moment to disappear from sight.

After a period of time, that middle-aged person appeared at an inn that was around four miles away from Li Palace, they took out two dark red medicinal pills from their chest area and then swallowed them. They then painfully coughed for a while, before finally subduing their injury, then walked over to the bed and laid on top of it, the conical hat shifted to one side and within their black hair, two bumps could vaguely be seen.

After noon, all the teahouses and stores became especially busy, but the accounts of the storytellers were no longer all that captivating, that's because the results to the Academic Exam had been officially announced. Every teahouse and store's manager or employee had gone to Li Palace and copied down the results, having returned, they now began to give details to the patrons.

Placing last in the academic phase was a Star Seizer Academy student named Zhang Ting Tao, the populace didn't have any sort of recognition of this name and thus, there naturally wasn't much discussion on it, with only a few mocking remarks and attacks on those who ran the academy before subsiding.

Xuan Yuan Po's results were very close to the bottom, Tang Thirty-Six ranked seventh and Zhuang Huan Yu sixth. The four scholars of Scholartree Manor had extremely good results, they had all actually managed to place within the top 10.

Of course, what the populace was most interested in, were the two foremost rankings – Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng both placed at first and second respectively, beside their names on the rankings was also a note: Outstanding.

Looking at the final results to the Academic Exam, the viewers were all debating heavily, clicking their tongues in astonishment, pointing at Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng's names, gasping praises nonstop.

Visitors that had come from outside of the Capital were very confused with this, wondering to themselves that even though they were ranked at the top, was it worthy of such praise?

Some people from the Capital explained: the academic results for the Grand Examination would usually just have rankings, only

papers that were exceptional would be specially noted as to being “outstanding”, with “exceptional” usually referring to getting all the answers correct.

Both, Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng’s names had the note of “outstanding”, this made it clear that both their papers could be considered perfect. It had to be known that this was an extremely rare event – there had already been a lot of years where something similar has not occurred in the Grand Examination.

It was only with this explanation that those visitors from the outer regions came to understand the reason, but they still had something puzzling them; since both examinees had such outstanding results in the academic phase, having probably answered everything correctly, how had they distinguished the better?

Why was Gou Han Shi ranked first while Chen Chang Sheng was only ranked second?

This question was something no one could answer, even those knowledgeable citizens of the Capital were very curious, in the same way, the Li Palace examiners that were tasked with reviewing the results were also puzzled.

The principal examiner looked at the clergy member that had a slightly frosty expression on their face; they had obviously come to raise a fuss. The examiner thought to himself: “Even if the Education Board is angry with Chen Chang Sheng not taking first place, is it necessary to make it so evident?”

However, the Education Board, under the control of His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, in this past year its influence

had become abnormally strong, even if the principal examiner's position was higher than the other party's, he still had to carefully explain himself.

“It was a problem in the regulation of wording.”

He looked at those few clergy members from the Education Board who were tasked with reviewing the academic results, his expression solemn, and said: “In no other aspects could a difference be determined, but Gou Han Shi's wording was extremely rigorous and well structured, especially for common terms with regards to the classics, even duplicate words that had been proscribed were correct.

He continued: “Though Chen Chang Sheng did not have anything wrong with his answers, his wording was too archaic; according to the criteria of edits undertaken during the great revisions, it would naturally be marked down.”

Results for the academic phase had already been sent out of Li Palace and announced to the world, it was obviously no longer possible to change them. Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng, whom had both been evaluated as outstanding, became figures of praise for everyone.

Shortly after, once the participants of the final round were confirmed, everyone was extraordinarily shocked, chatter abounded; that's because it was also Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng, this meant that this year's first upon the First Banner would definitely be from one of these two.

One is the world renowned Second Law of the Divine State's

Seven Laws; Li Shan Sword Sect's savant youth; someone that had read the scriptures in their entirety; Gou Han Shi.

One is Orthodox Academy's first new student in many years; a target of heavy nurture for the Orthodoxy's tradition faction; Xu You Rong's fiancé; Chen Chang Sheng.

From just fame alone, the two were equals, and being able to reach this point was proof of their respective strength and learning; yet, the amount of people that looked favourably upon Chen Chang Sheng remained few.

In the latest pay-out rates revealed by the four major gambling venues: Gou Han Shi was 1 and a third; Chen Chang Sheng was 7; the difference was exceedingly stark, it could even be said that the situation was an easy win for Gou Han Shi.

Hearing the rambunctious sounds that were being transmitted from below, Tian Hai Sheng Xue's face revealed a reflective expression. Though he had placed a lot of money on Chen Chang Sheng, he didn't actually consider the possibility of that youth from Orthodox Academy being able to reach this point; but even he, couldn't be optimistic over Chen Chang Sheng's chances of getting another win.

The reason why no one looked favourably upon Chen Chang Sheng even at this stage, was because everyone, including Tian Hai Sheng Xue, knew that there existed a hurdle between Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng.

That hurdle was extremely high.

That hurdle was linked to life and death, and also exceeded life and death.

Within the Hall of Zhao Wen, His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha slowly opened his eyes, staring at the results of the academic phase that were displayed upon the mirror, he peacefully remained silent for a long time before laughing out.

He got up after much difficulty with the support of Minister Xin, leaving the hall and heading towards the Hall of Clear Virtue.

He had originally only wanted to use the Grand Examination to make Chen Chang Sheng mature faster, but never expected that Chen Chang Sheng would really be able to pluck that plump and juicy fruit. If there wasn't any hope, then so be it, but since there was hope, he naturally wouldn't allow anyone to ruin it. No one.

Deep within Li Palace, the Holy Crown laid upon the table, bearing the heavens that were descending from atop the hall, glimmering with a glorious dazzle that bewitched the eyes.

The Holy Rod upon the platform, reflected a reversed image of the water pool, as if it were within the deep sea.

In comparison to these two divine artefacts, the green leaf within the clay flowerpot inevitably looked rather tacky, but His Holiness did not look at the Holy Crown or Holy Rod, but peacefully gazed upon the green leaf, silently, slightly entranced.

He had his hands held behind him, resembling some elderly

gardener.

Nearby, was the clear water pool, the wooden ladle gently bobbed upon the water, akin to a boat. At any moment, it could immediately be filled with water, that water could be used on the green leaf, it could also be used to cause a spell of rain.

At a location most distant from the Capital, there is an overgrown and desolate mountain range, between the mountains were endless forests.

White mist enveloped the area and the mountain paths were damp and slippery making it difficult to trek, it was also eerily quiet.

If it weren't for the fact that tapping sounds would occasionally break out on the path, it would perhaps appear even more sinister and horrifying.

That tapping sound was from a staff landing upon the wet stones on the path.

Yu Ren leaned onto his crutch and struggled along the mountain path. His and Chen Chang Sheng's master, that secretive Taoist Ji, was currently walking ahead with his arms held together in front of him horizontally, seemingly not worried as to if Yu Ren could keep up.

The tapping sound continued for a very long time; mist within the serene and quiet forest became increasingly thick, and many faint, fragmentary sounds could be heard, as if countless creatures were being drawn here by the sound of the walking stick.

Chapter 170 – The World Waits Upon This Battle

Arriving before the mist, Taoist Ji stilled his steps. Yu Ren had one leg that was slightly lame but if it weren't for climbing up a steep mountain path, he would rarely have to use a crutch. He uncomfortably used his left underarm to clutch onto the walking stick, then used both hands to gesture a question: "The Grand Examination should have its result by now? I wonder how junior brother is currently."

Taoist Ji's countenance was elegant and untainted by the world, his eyes were the same as it had been in the past, showing no signs of ageing. Seeing the faint hints of worry showing upon Yu Ren's eyes, he didn't say anything, but laughed and rubbed Yu Ren's head.

Yu Ren once again gestured a question: "Master, when do we go to the Capital?"

Taoist Ji answered: "When you need to return to the Capital, we will go."

Yu Ren didn't notice the use of the word "return" when his Master spoke of going to the Capital.

This was the Eastern Continent's most remote and wild mountain range, monstrous beasts roamed freely and the signs of humanity were rare, being much more desolate than the mountain behind Xi Ning Village. The mists were heavily damp and when

walking amidst the mists, it would almost seem as if one had left the human realm; how could the people sent by Mo Yu possibly be able to find this master and disciple pair?

The fragmentary sounds from within the mist became increasingly frequent, there were also faint sights of movement, following this, over a dozen overpowering presences appeared; these were likely some extremely powerful monstrous beasts.

Taoist Ji didn't want to bother facing these grotesque beings that were hidden. He lightly frowned and said: "Open the path."

Yu Ren followed the instruction and went forwards, facing the thick mist at the end of the mountain path and shouted out.

He was missing the end half of his tongue, therefore he couldn't talk the way a normal person would, but this didn't mean he couldn't produce any sounds; all that could be heard was a sharp and forlorn hiss bursting out from between his lips.

It resembled a hiss, but in actuality it was a word, a single syllable word that contained limitless amounts of information; this was precisely the same type of word used by Chen Chang Sheng in the underground space for communicating with the Black Dragon: Dragon Speech.

Yu Ren let out a solitary, clear hiss, the hiss broke through the air and entered the cloudy mist without a trace, not stirring even a single ripple; yet, at the next moment, the crushing intimidation contained within the hiss, spread out in all directions, from the

mist to the entire mountain range.

Those monstrous beasts that were concealed deep within the mist gave out horrified drones of unease in a show of deference and apology; accompanying the sounds of scraping, they disappeared at the fastest speed possible, returning the clouds to serenity.

.....

At a place even farther away from the Capital, there was a white coloured barren plain. Within the centre of this barren plain, there is a city built from stone, its walls encircled tens of kilometres, looking extremely grand.

Several million people knelt upon the barren plains that were outside of the stone city.

Their knees and foreheads, having been in contact for a long time with the scalding hot sand that had been heated by the nine suns, gave off the faint smell of burning, but no signs of pain could be seen upon their faces, only an absolute tranquillity. Neither did they let out any sounds, there was only an absolute silence, akin to a peaceful yet terrifying sea; a sea of people.

At the fore of this congregation was a platform constructed from wood, the wooden platform still had countless green leaves around its edges, making a clear contrast from the barren, simple and blistering surroundings.

Within the centre of the platform there was a symbol shaped like the character “zheng” erected, conveying a strongly religious feeling.

Following the prayers of several million believers, the symbol was

currently emanating a faint Holy Radiance.

A middle-aged man stood in front of the religious symbol, quietly watching the millions of people that were knelt before him. From the look of this man's clothing, he should be a religious monk.

With his age, faint wrinkles could be seen on the edge of his eyes, but this did nothing to detract from his perfect features. The most captivating feature was his eyes, those calm and peaceful eyes contained boundless compassion and love, as if they could gaze upon places infinitely distant; gaze upon everything.

He raised the Blessed Rod within his hand, using a faintly smiling visage to face this wicked world.

The millions of people upon the white, barren plains stood up, announcing to the hills and valleys:

“None care not for their homeland.”

.....

It was early Spring in the Capital, yet it still remained bitingly cold. Old Snow City's early Spring was unrelentingly cold and harsh; blizzards fell like a sobbing grievance upon the city's streets and alleys, chafing across as if it were a sandstorm, making it hard to open one's eyes.

The demon race enjoyed the night and tranquillity, enjoyed

blood and slaughter, with the latter being to their core; therefore, within the secretive dwellings of the demon race's royalty or artists, there would inexorably be paintings that had vivid colours or strange outlines.

Yet, the colour hue for Old Snow City was a drab grey, causing people to feel tranquil, or perhaps even a little numb. The city's populace enjoyed wearing black robes and from afar, it was difficult to make out as to who was who.

A demon dressed in a black robe walked within the blizzard; the black robe he wore was rather plain and a little old, with its hem showing some tears, but at the very least, this black robe was slightly different from others.

The black robe flitted in and out of view within the furious blizzard, even if one was to stare intently, it would be hard to confirm its position, this lasted until he exited Old Snow City, standing at the glacier on the Southern side.

A chill wind blasted through, lifting the brim of his hat and revealing the side of his face. That face was abnormally pale; as if it hadn't come into contact with the sun for many years; as if he had just recently suffered a serious illness; as if it lacked any warmth at all; even more so, as if it was completely devoid of life, carrying with it a sense of death that could cause palpitations.

That demon gazed towards the South, the direction of the Capital, and remained silent for a long while. His lips then curled and his detached voice bore an uncontrollable sense of elation: "You finally cannot continue to ignore his existence."

.....

After Luo Luo moved to Li Palace, the Hundred Herb Garden remained vacant. With all the youths from Orthodox Academy having gone to participate in the Grand Examination, the academy was also devoid of people, this naturally meant no one knew of the new door upon the wall being opened.

The Black Goat walked out from the door, heading towards the lakeside. Remnants of snow still remained on the grass by the lakeside, with the grass stems wilting and brown, the Black Goat felt a little puzzled, thinking that the grass that youth had fed it half a year ago didn't have this type of taste.

The Divine Empress had also come to Orthodox Academy.

This was her first time visiting the academy in over ten years.

Previously, at the Hundred Herb Garden, she was reminded of the massacre committed by Emperor Taizong towards the royal clan; currently, standing at Orthodox Academy, she thought of her own massacre against the Orthodoxy's tradition faction.

Since Emperor Taizong's ascent to heaven, she had killed a lot of people who opposed her, from the moment she had started to handle state documents for Emperor Taizong, those people had started to oppose her, this persisted until over ten years ago. When His Royal Majesty was on his sickbed, suffering excruciating pain, those people continued to not care about anything else, only wishing to oppose her.

Those who dared to oppose her would in the end be killed by her; she had killed for hundreds of years, up until over ten years ago, after having killed so many people at Orthodox Academy, would finally, no one dare to stand out and oppose her.

She knew that her hands were steeped in blood, but she didn't care; it was just, having arrived at the academy after so many years and seeing that its old lawn space was no longer neglected and desolate, she was naturally reminded of those days that had constant bloodshed.

These memories wouldn't make her feel unhappy, but neither would they make her pleased.

Especially because amongst those she had killed, there were a lot of people she admired; those people were courageous, virtuous, able, talented, outstanding, resolute and noble; she had given them many chances, yet, they never gave her any, even to the point of forcing her to kill them.

Because those people wanted to attest to the world that she is a tyrannical ruler.

The Divine Empress looked towards the direction of Li Palace, thinking back on the past made her feel rather bitterly cold; bitterly disappointed.

A spell of rain a spell of cold.

The Pope had actually intervened.

She had previously thought that Chen Chang Sheng would only reach that point, but it was only now that she understood it wasn't as such; therefore, she wanted to ask those people: "What point do you want to reach? Do you want to, once again, force me to kill?"

.....

Important people have important considerations to make, small characters need not concern themselves with the considerations of important people, Chen Chang Sheng didn't care as to how many people were fixating on the Grand Examination, fixating on himself. Just as how he and Luo Luo had previously discussed, he only cared about whether if he could take first place upon the First banner, whether if he could enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist (Ling Yan Pavilion).

In comparison to this, even the demon race's invasion would be unimportant, let alone other matters. That's why he patiently prepared for the last match, quietly and intently listening to the battle tactics Tang Thirty-Six had laid out for him.

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him, and with a seriousness he had never displayed before, he said: "First, use compassion to move others. Then use reason to persuade others. Then use power to pressure others. Then finally, do you move onto fighting others."

He continued: "Three sentences, three methods, the ordering is

very important. Let's hope it has some effect, of course, if that impoverished scholar is still obstinate, then I suggest you consider what type of method you should use that can allow you lose a little less unsightly."

Luo Luo was by the side and said in a low voice: "Sir, try bribing him."

Tang Thirty-Six scoffed and said: "That's Gou Han Shi, a scholar that takes pride in being a virtuous gentleman, how could he possibly be bribed? He's not a pauper like Zhe Xiu that has never seen money before."

Zhe Xiu was near the white poplar tree, on the stretcher, his bleeding had slowly come to a stop and his condition had improved somewhat; hearing Tang Thirty-Six's words, his face remained expressionless, neither did he say anything.

Luo Luo got close to Chen Chang Sheng's ear and said something to him in a low voice, Chen Chang Sheng felt rather startled, not wanting to accept, but he couldn't stop her pushing the item onto him.

Tang Thirty-Six saw the item Luo Luo stuffed into Chen Chang Sheng's chest area and couldn't stop a small twitch from appearing on his lips, he then searched himself. Finding that he couldn't find anything of a similar level and after giving it some thought, he freed the Sword of Wen Shui that was held upon his waist and passed it over.

“I have my own sword, what do I need yours for?” asked Chen Chang Sheng in a puzzled voice.

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him in the eyes and said: “That’s my Tang Clan’s Ancestral Sword, akin to Qi Jian’s Discipline Hall Relic Sword. It’s not suitable for entering the Banner of Hundred Arms, but that doesn’t mean it’s weak. Taking it with you, at an important juncture it can help you block a manoeuvre; even if you don’t have a use for it, it’s not exactly heavy, it can’t possibly hinder you?”

Chen Chang Sheng understood his meaning and the kind intent was hard to reject, after thinking upon it for a moment, he accepted it.

“Sensible,” Tang Thirty-Six’s action reminded Luo Luo; without any hesitation, she uncoiled Rainfall Whip from her waist and passed it into Chen Chang Sheng’s hand.

Xuan Yuan Po used his massive hands to search himself thoroughly, but didn’t find anything worthwhile, not even a safety talisman could be found; he couldn’t help feeling a little dejected.

Chen Chang Sheng patted his upper arm and said, while smiling: “You’ll make dinner in the evening.”

Xuan Yuan Po gave a simple laugh and said: “If you win, I’ll specially add two more spoons of salt.”

Chen Chang Sheng gave it a thought. If he really could take first place in the Grand Examination, then consuming a little more salt and oil for a single meal and drinking two, three small goblets of wine seemed to be fine.

He prepared to leave the woodlands, but suddenly thought of something, he turned his head back to look at Zhe Xiu, who was on the stretcher and said: “Whether if I win or lose, I will strive my best to give you that thing.”

Zhe Xiu looked at him with an expressionless face and said: “You have to win.”

Chen Chang Sheng entered the Tower of Purging Dust.

Gou Han Shi had already entered the arena, quietly standing. His clothing was slightly faded from washing and his sword didn't have anything that could identify it as to being precious or common; just as how he was himself.

Chapter 171 – Three Blades Of The Fisherman's Song

The two faced and formally greeted each other.

The battle that was about to start will be the last, it will also be the match that determines first place upon the First Banner for the Grand Examination; thus, in comparison to the previous matches, the atmosphere was naturally a little different.

The second floor window was opened and the important personages were all by the window side; the Li Palace clergy tasked with supervising the exam had also moved to the balustrade. This wasn't for getting a better view, but a sign of respect for the two examinees that were participating in this match.

Once again, Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi did a formal greeting, but this time, it was towards those up on the second floor.

It was at this moment that a creaking sound could be heard within the tower, subsequently, the clergy could be seen gesturing a formal greeting as they all slowly gave way. The personages had a change to their expressions and they turned to meet the source of the sound.

Leader of the Orthodoxy's tradition faction – His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, had personally arrived at the arena.

Due to his age and seniority, but even more so, due to his opposition against the Pope, His Eminence's standing within the Orthodoxy had risen inexorably over the past half a year.

Prince Chen Liu and Xue Xing Chuan paid their respects; Xu Shi Ji did a formal greeting; finally, the two Archbishops of the Holy Church who were from a different faction than Archbishop Mei Li Sha, half rose from their seats in acknowledgment.

His Eminence looked at Mo Yu and gave a light nod.

Mo Yu understood the intent behind this Elder personally arriving at the scene, her expression became even colder but she didn't say anything.

The second floor became somewhat busy, with the personages all giving their greetings in turn; seating was rearranged, tea needed to be brewed and fruit needed to be brought in; for a while, the main leads, Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng, had been slightly neglected.

For the moment, it wouldn't be appropriate to start fighting, thus, the two of them started a conversation.

Gou Han Shi said: "You have given a lot of people a surprise."

Chen Chang Sheng said: "Your luck in the drawings has been fairly good."

This was the truth and not modesty, neither was it modesty with intent to be conceited.

Gou Han Shi quietly looked at him and said: “With your ability, your past half a year in the Capital has been far too peaceful, you shouldn’t be so placid; you have the qualifications to live a little more freely.”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “I didn’t expect you to advise me.”

Gou Han Shi lightly laughed and said: “As people who enjoy reading, we are indeed not overly fond of going out, but this was advice given to me by Senior some years ago. I find it rather sensible, thus, I’ve conveyed the same words to you.”

His senior was obviously Qiu Shan Jun.

Chen Chang Sheng pondered for a moment, but didn’t continue this line of conversation, instead, he replied to Gou Han Shi’s first topic and said: “I need to live carefully and cautiously, therefore I’ve gotten used to living carefully and cautiously.”

Gou Han Shi didn’t agree and said: “Being careful and cautious is not far from being draconian.”

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head, resolutely saying: “It is being careful and cautious.”

Gou Han Shi remained silent for a moment, then asked, in a

slightly baffled tone: “Why?”

“This is something people don’t understand, neither is it something I can explain,” said Chen Chang Sheng.

Gou Han Shi said: “Living carefully and cautiously definitely doesn’t include taking first place upon the First Banner.”

Chen Chang Sheng gave a glance towards the second floor and then said: “You were also there that day; you know those words were not said by me.”

Gou Han Shi stared at him directly and said: “It wasn’t said by you, but is it something you have to do?”

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t say anything, tacitly admitting it.

Gou Han Shi continued: “That’s why I find it rather contradictory.”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “As I said before, this is something people don’t understand and something I can’t explain, but it’s not contradictory, because no one enjoys living carefully and cautiously.”

At that moment, the clergy member’s voice floated down from the second floor.

It was the same line that had been repeated countless times today.

“The both of you... are you ready?”

Before the start of the battle, Chen Chang Sheng said some words of apology to Gou Han Shi.

“I have to take first place, for this, I’m willing to do anything. Zhe Xiu... received money from Orthodox Academy; I did a transaction with him and he promised me to try his best to defeat you, or at the very least, weaken you. If he was to match against me, then he would just directly concede.”

Gou Han Shi felt startled, he remained silent for a time, then said: “No wonder why he was so tenacious.”

Upon finishing his words, he started to cough, with his brows lightly clenched, evidently in pain. He then looked at Chen Chang Sheng and asked: “You’re not someone that cares for hollow fame, why are you so adamant about the Grand Examination?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “As I said before, a lot of things cannot be explained.”

Gou Han Shi didn’t ask further.

Chen Chang Sheng hadn’t finished speaking however, he looked at the sword strapped to Gou Han Shi’s waist and asked, with some

uncertainty: “Can the complete sword manual be exchanged for anything?”

The complete form for Li Shan Sword Arts can be exchanged for many things, especially when it comes to disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect.

Not mentioning first place in the Grand Examination, even things that are far more important, Gou Han Shi would be willing to give them up.

Gou Han Shi knew that the full form for Li Shan Sword Arts used to be kept at White Emperor City and that it was now at Orthodox Academy, but he never could have expected Chen Chang Sheng to make this type of suggestion.

He remained silent for a long while, then shook his head and said: “I am a disciple of Li Mountain, therefore I cannot accept; since it’s our sect’s sword art, in the future, us disciples will use our own strength to return it to Li Mountain instead of using it in a transaction.”

Hearing him refuse Luo Luo’s suggestion Chen Chang Sheng didn’t feel any disappointment, in contrast, he felt slightly relieved.

“Then come.”

Chen Chang Sheng raised Rainfall Whip in his right hand with True Essence lightly flowing and the whip head slightly raised, lightly swaying with the wind.

This was the final and most important match for this year’s

Grand Examination.

It started very calmly and very suddenly.

Gou Han Shi drew his blade from its scabbard, freely raising his arm, the sword lightly quivered in the air, letting off a buzzing sound.

He headed towards Chen Chang Sheng. His steps were slow and steady, but gave the sense that it couldn't possibly be dodged.

Gou Han Shi thrust out and a sword manifestation harmoniously travelled outwards; no sound echoed within the tower, yet, a clear sound resonated from a faraway location within the blue sky on the horizon, as if someone was intoning a song.

The fisherman's song echoes; as the sound has reached the ear, so does the tune arrive.

The sword came too fast and too placidly, to the point where it seemed to convey a sense of joy in the blade meeting its opponent. Facing this seemingly ordinary move, Chen Chang Sheng actually felt as if there wasn't any possibility of dodging, whether be it Discerning Steps or pure speed, they were no longer able to have an effect in such a short amount of time.

He poured his True Essence into Rainfall Whip, using the whip as a sword and holding it out horizontally in front of himself.

A sharp sound of clashing, then Rainfall Whip began to violently shudder.

Upon the whip, a golden light appeared, exhibiting a powerful energy that forcefully blocked Gou Han Shi's sword manifestation, yet, it couldn't stop the manifestation from travelling into Chen Chang Sheng's wrist from the handle of the whip.

His hand subsequently started to tremble and following this, his arm. A sharp pain carried upwards to his shoulder and he could no longer continue holding onto the whip. With the sound of air being split, Rainfall Whip slipped out of his grasp and left his hand.

At that moment, Gou Han Shi's second manoeuvre followed. With this move's appearance, the faraway horizon once again echoed in song; a sunset glow filled the heavens.

Having lost Rainfall Whip, Chen Chang Sheng still had the Sword of Wen Shui. He grasped onto the sword's hilt and pulled outwards, all that could be heard was a single sound ringing out as the blade left its scabbard. The bright blade reflected the sunset clouds outside and at the same time gave rise to more, tinting all the windows and doors within the tower with a warm red glow.

Night Clouds End, from the Three Forms of Wen Shui.

Two sunsets clashed within the Tower of Purging Dust; the black eaves turned to gold.

An extremely pure aura travelling with the sword manifestation inside the sunset clouds, broke through Chen Chang Sheng's defence and headed towards his torso, if it wasn't for the Sword of Wen Shui suddenly wailing at the last moment and him making use of the sword's own powerful aura to help block most of the attack's momentum, he would definitely have suffered heavy injuries.

The Sword of Wen Shui had saved him, but it had also been thrown out into the sky by Gou Han Shi's manoeuvre, it whistled as it spun away and flew far out of the tower, unknown as to where it would land.

Chen Chang Sheng unhesitatingly jumped backwards, wanting to use Discerning Steps; at the same time, his right hand had already grasped onto his short sword's hilt while his left hand held onto a small item that dropped out of his sleeve.

As expected, Gou Han Shi's third sword arrived.

Three moves in succession, without any sort of gap in-between, this didn't give Chen Chang Sheng any sort of breathing room. A song drifted in from the horizon and sunset clouds sprang from nothing; a fishing boat then appeared from within the clouds.

The fisherman's song is sung thrice and thus, three swords.

This was the sword art used by Gou Han Shi, and also his strongest.

His first sword had struck down Rainfall Whip, the second move had sent the Sword of Wen Shui flying. This third manoeuvre was akin to the sunset's brilliance, dazzling the eyes as it arrived; how could Chen Chang Sheng counter this?

The three moves were chained sinuously, perfect in every way; he didn't even have the chance to utilise Discerning Steps.

A loud cracking noise resounded within the tower.

In front of Gou Han Shi's blade, there was already no trace of Chen Chang Sheng's figure.

Chen Chang Sheng reappeared on the wall behind Gou Han Shi, at a distance of 70 odd metres.

Due to the three swords that were seemingly pleasant and calm, but in actuality, were petrifying, his body had become ashen in colour and a slight shivering could be seen.

A wisp of white smoke could be seen rising from the gaps of the fingers on his left hand that was currently tightly clenched into a fist.

Gou Han Shi withdrew his sword and calmly stood, he looked at Chen Chang Sheng and asked, slightly surprised: "Thousand Mile Button?"

That's right, the last method used by Chen Chang Sheng to avoid the final blow from the Three Blades of the Fisherman's Song was

a Thousand Mile Button. Only this item could help him avoid the momentum Gou Han Shi had been accumulating for so long, his three unyielding manoeuvres.

While he, Luo Luo and the others were contemplating how to approach this battle at the woodlands, how could Gou Han Shi possibly not also do the same?

Within the tower, it was blanketed in silence, after a brief moment, a gasp of surprise drifted down from the second floor.

In order to avoid a single manoeuvre, Chen Chang Sheng had actually utilised a priceless Thousand Mile Button that is valued akin to life itself amongst cultivators. This made everyone feel shocked, at the same time, it confirmed the degree to which Her Highness respected and cherished her young tutor. But what shocked those people within the tower the most, was Gou Han Shi's three manoeuvres.

Those three swords seemed very ordinary, without any accompanying storm, with the sunset being serene; yet, it was indeed worthy of being Gou Han Shi's strongest three moves, to have actually given people the impression that they didn't want to resist it.

If Chen Chang Sheng hadn't used Rainfall Whip, the Sword of Wen Shui and the Thousand Mile Button, he would definitely have lost.

Gou Han Shi really was exceedingly strong.

They were all rather amazed, even in the previous match against Zhe Xiu, Gou Han Shi hadn't immediately used a secret sword like this the moment he started. Why had he not held back at all this time while facing against Chen Chang Sheng?

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Rainfall Whip which was lying on the floor, thought of the Sword of Wen Shui which had fallen to some unknown place and thought of the Thousand Mile Button that had dissipated into nothingness within his palm.

He became silent, knowing that the gap between him and Gou Han Shi was enormously large, far larger than the gap between Zhe Xiu and Gou Han Shi.

If Gou Han Shi still had a fourth move, how could he block?

Chapter 172 – [TBD]

Three Blades of the Fisherman's Song doesn't have a fourth move.

Mo Yu stood by the window silently. A lot of Li Palace clergy had only seen the elegance and power of Gou Han Shi's three moves, but they couldn't see what she did; it was precisely due to his previous match against Zhe Xiu draining him too much that prompted him to use his strongest three moves the moment the match had started; what he sought was a quick victory.

Of course, even though Gou Han Shi's three blades had been propitiously avoided by Chen Chang Sheng, she still didn't believe that youth to have any probability of winning, this was because a difference in cultivation level wasn't something that can be completely made up for through tools alone, neither was it related to something as cheap as courage; since that hurdle existed, it couldn't be surmounted.

That hurdle was called Ethereal Opening.

Gou Han Shi had already completed his Ethereal Opening, while Chen Chang Sheng was still impossibly far away from it, therefore the result of this match was predetermined, no matter how heavily injured or tired Gou Han Shi might become.

What was Ethereal Opening? This was opening heaven and earth through the Ethereal Palace; only by cultivating to this level will the body's meridian channels be completely connected, with True

Essence being able to flow endlessly, also, at this stage, heaven and earth was akin to the cultivator, with just the raising of a hand or foot, it would automatically give rise to a response.

True Essence would also be purer and stronger, if a cultivator at the meditation stage's True Essence was said to be a stone, then a cultivator at the Ethereal Opening realm would have True Essence akin to a metal drill, being several times stronger.

The further one reaches in cultivation, the harder it becomes and the more dangerous. The hurdle of Ethereal Opening was even more unusual, the death rate is extremely high, therefore, this hurdle would often be referred to as a stage of life and death by young cultivators with feelings of trepidation and yearning. The reason why the death rate is so high when going through Ethereal Opening is because the Ethereal Palace... is the heart.

The heart is far too fragile, once it sustains an injury, it is very hard to salvage, that's why Ethereal Opening needs to be sought carefully.

Waiting till one had reached the upper stage of the Meditation Realm and utilising extremely cautious methods of self-observation to control the divine sense, guiding Starlight to lightly knock upon the Ethereal Palace's door and finally, the heart.

The will being the same as that of heaven and earth, only then, would the Ethereal Palace's door slowly open. Thus, there is a saying that Ethereal Opening is a cultivation of the heart's will, something extremely difficult.

This needs at least a hundred nights of Star Brilliance knocking upon that door, with any sort of complication, the cultivator's Ethereal Palace would be damaged. At best it would lead to heavy injuries and paralysis, but most commonly, it would directly lead

to death itself.

Since the Heavenly Tomes descended and humanity started cultivating, countless young cultivators had fallen before this hurdle.

It was unknown as to how many young, talented and intelligent geniuses had tragically died like this. Therefore, the continent had always had the saying: “Only those geniuses that have achieved Ethereal Opening are true geniuses.”

Gou Han Shi has completed his Ethereal Opening before the age of twenty, he naturally was a genius, and more so, a prodigy.

How could Chen Chang Sheng possibly be his match?

Three Blades of the Fisherman’s Song, it seemed temperate upon sight, but in actuality, it utilises a large amount of True Essence, even with Gou Han Shi’s ability, upon expending three moves, he needed to pause for a moment, additionally, he had also developed some doubt over something.

Chen Chang Sheng used Rainfall whip and the Sword of Wen Shui to receive the first two blades, relying mostly upon the two heavenly weapon’s inherent power. But on the moment of contact, Gou Han Shi could clearly feel that Chen Chang Sheng’s True Essence was slightly abnormal, it didn’t seem to be, or more specifically, it shouldn’t be, as strong as what he displayed, but should be a little more average.

“Your meridian channels...” he looked at Chen Chang Sheng with

his brows slightly raised, but in the end he didn't say anything.

Chen Chang Sheng moved closer to the wall, gripping onto his short sword, cautiously staring at him, with his expression especially stern and focused. It wasn't until he was sure that there won't be a fourth move that he could relax slightly, using the fastest possible speed to turn his hand over and flick his finger.

He lightly flicked his left hand's ring finger, that gold wire which was wound upon his fingertip straightened out with a ringing sound, becoming a gold needle, its tip was extremely sharp, glimmering with a cold glare.

He stabbed the needle into his neck with a lightning-quick motion, deeply, with only a small tip showing.

Following this motion, with the needle entering the opening, he continuously shuddered, helping him to quickly stabilise his divine sense once more, at the same time it stimulated the three broken meridian lines in his upper body, causing them to wound up tightly. After a formless scraping, though it naturally couldn't allow his meridian channels to become linked, it gave the True Essence flow a wider channel.

Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po's bodies were not the same as his, but through his guidance and treatment for them, Chen Chang Sheng's understanding of meridians channels had become deeper; though he couldn't treat his own illness, he could at least achieve this amount of alleviation.

Gou Han Shi didn't know what he was currently doing and instead, thought it was a method for forcing out his own potential. For a canonical school such as Li Shan Sword Sect, this type of method would definitely be considered a corrupt discipline art. He couldn't stop himself from frowning.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know what was currently going through Gou Han Shi's head, neither could he concern himself with what Gou Han Shi might be thinking. Using his short sword to cut off a scrap of cloth from his upper clothing, he tightly tied his right hand to the short sword's hilt, pulling it taut with his teeth.

Gou Han Shi's brows were lightly knotted and his sword grip tightened considerably, this is because he could feel that something was different.

As Gou Han Shi's grip tightened, Chen Chang Sheng moved; from the Horn Mansion to the Ox Mansion, transitioning from the East to the sky, within but a moment in time, his figure disappeared, and upon reappearing, he had already arrived before Gou Han Shi.

The short sword broke through the air and came down, yet encountered Gou Han Shi's sword.

Gou Han Shi didn't know all the complicated and inexplicable positions to Discerning Steps, but knew Discerning Steps itself, otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to expose Luo Luo's footwork skill at the Ivy League gathering, neither would he had been able to predict his opponent's movement and prepare

sufficiently to meet the accurate blow from the sword in Chen Chang Sheng's hand.

For all the angles surrounding his body, there wasn't a single blind spot.

Two swords crossing, but they had yet to fully clash, there was still a minute distance between them; as the True Essence imbued upon the blades met, the air twisted and turned, then dissipated, being forced apart.

A ringing sound reverberated and Chen Chang Sheng flew backwards.

He had wanted to use the method that allowed him to obtain victory over Zhuang Huan Yu, the very same method Gou Han Shi had advised Liang Ban Hu to use in order to defeat Tang Thirty-Six.

Exchanging sword for sword and wound for wound, relying upon his incredibly tough body to seek victory, yet, who could have expected, without even having the two blades properly clash, Gou Han Shi had easily used a single move to force him back.

The most frightening thing was, even though the swords had already separated, Chen Chang Sheng could still clearly feel a strand of True Essence, following the blade's length and traversing past his inner channels to directly attack his Ethereal Palace.

With a dull thump, Chen Chang Sheng's inner mind had been injured by the sword manifestation, blood appear on the edge of his mouth and his footsteps touched upon the floor, unable to stand stably. He retreated once and again until he reached the wall,

before finally being able to forcefully stand firmly.

A blade's edge cut through the air, and he raised his sword horizontally in order to maintain a defensive posture. His face was pallid and blood trickled from his lips, looking rather miserable, but what was even more miserable was his current state of mind.

Gou Han Shi really was very strong, far stronger than Zhuang Huan Yu, he couldn't exchange wound for wound even if he wanted to.

A shrill and forlorn sound once again resounded within the tower and Gou Han Shi's sword once again came at him, this time the move used was Thirteen Swords of a Toppling Star; the sword struck out like a star, seemingly constant, yet hard to follow.

PA PA PA PA

Tens crisp sounds continuously arose.

Chen Chang Sheng could no longer guard the area under his feet and was forced to turn towards his left, continuously retreating, with his steps chaotic, trudging up the damp sand as he retreated a distance of over 30 metres.

As he finally stood firm, he could no longer suppress the malefic feeling within his chest and a sound escaped from his mouth, alongside a mouthful of blood.

Gou Han Shi held his sword, calmly standing within the arena,

the gaze he directed at Chen Chang Sheng did not contain any sort of mockery, scorn or taunting, but rather, it had a faint admiration and respect.

From Three Blades of the Fisherman's Song to Thirteen Swords of a Toppling Star, he had used the most powerful and familiar moves he knew. Through over ten years of bitter training, these sword manoeuvres were unending and as fast as lightning, with each manoeuvre following the other. No matter what opponent he was to face, under this chaining momentum, they would undoubtedly become flustered, their defeat looming.

Chen Chang Sheng couldn't block those moves, retreating time and time again in a rather dismal fashion and was wounded by True Essence, continuously coughing up blood, but his steps were still solid and his mind remained calm.

That's because Chen Chang Sheng's knew what he had to do to counter those sword manoeuvres.

Due to limitations of time, Chen Chang Sheng's cultivation on the path of the sword couldn't reach a pinnacle. Knowing the path but being unable to carry it out, yet, his knowledge on the way of the sword was extremely deep and broad, being especially familiar with the swords arts of Li Shan Sword Sect.

Where others wouldn't even know how to counter Gou Han Shi's sword manoeuvres, he could find the most appropriate move for countering, if it wasn't for the levels between them being too different, he would perhaps be able to receive those moves a lot easier.

It was a pity then, that the difference between levels is something difficult to surmount.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Gou Han Shi silently, the right hand that was gripping onto his sword lightly trembled.

Having truly experienced the might of the Ethereal Opening realm and feeling that strand of True Essence which was still continuously attacking him within his inner channels, he was certain that if he hadn't used cloth to bind the sword hilt to his hand, the sword would have probably already left his grasp.

The most evident difference of this gap between levels was in the purity, or perhaps strength of True Essence. He clearly understood that this difference wasn't something that can be shortened in such a short time, therefore, he could only think of a different method; to try and close in on this difference through sheer quantity.

What I have is silver, what you have is gold. Silver is inferior, whilst gold is precious, then if I wish to overwhelm you in terms of fortune, I can only rely upon having a quantity of silver that engulfs you, that's right, it's that simple.

With his mind set, Chen Chang Sheng unhesitatingly began to meditate and self-observe. His divine sense went from without to within, traversing tens of thousands of miles in but an instant and arriving at that pure white snow plain. His divine sense, akin to a gust of wind, alighted upon a snow plain in the Southeast.

At that instant, it seemed as if he could hear some sort of sound, with that sound being akin to dry leaves that had accumulated for

some years being set on fire.

As if someone had added fuel to a burning pyre.

A meeting of the strongest liquor and the prettiest girl.

With a rippling sound; a loud whoosh resounded; then, a cheer.

The wind was like an inferno, dropping down. The Southeastern snow plain fragment was immediately set ablaze. The Star Brilliance that had remained undisturbed for many months became a violent blaze, setting alight everything around it.

Chen Chang Sheng's body instantly became incredibly hot and the very air around him heated up.

A horrifying heat took hold of his body and mind, all water became beads of sweat and quickly dissipated. It was unknown as to if this was the reason, but his muscles lost its water content, giving rise to waves of pain that felt like he was being ripped apart.

The biggest source of pain was a feeling; he subconsciously stuck out his tongue to greedily lick his lips, fighting against the feeling of irresistible thirst that came from them.

He really was very thirsty, really wanting to drink some water and really wanting to be deluged within icy cold rain.

The people observing the match had remained quiet. That was until they saw Chen Chang Sheng hold up his sword horizontally in front of him and the atmosphere within the tower suddenly becoming abnormally warm. With this, they finally realised that something was happening.

“He’s doing initial meditation again?”

“How is this possible?”

“Just how much Star Brilliance does he have inside of him?”

“Where is all that Star Brilliance being stored?”

Up on the second floor, countless sounds of shocked, exclaiming questions could be heard.

Chapter 173 – [TBD]

The temperature within the tower clearly rose and outside, the sound of cicadas could once again be heard. Those who had already experienced this before could vividly remember that this was a phenomenon caused by Chen Chang Sheng once again burning his Star Brilliance, they couldn't help feeling very surprised.

Upon counting, this was already the third time he had performed initial meditation, this completely went against what was told in the records of cultivation.

As for Gou Han Shi, who was seeing this for the first time, he was especially shocked and speechless, he completely couldn't understand, Chen Chang Sheng had clearly already entered the Meditation Realm, how could he possibly be able to once again perform initial meditation?

Of course, initial meditation is something very dangerous.

Though it was not fraught with life and death in the same way Ethereal Opening did, Chen Chang Sheng's meridians were different from others, his Fated Star was also different, alongside the quantity and power level of the Star Brilliance he absorbed having many unusual attributes.

Upon being set ablaze, the inferno would sear the skies, even if he had an incredible strong body after being bathed in dragon's blood, he still had difficulty enduring the heat, quickly entering a dangerous situation.

Due to having experienced this before and due to his opponent for this round being far too strong. Chen Chang Sheng forcefully

tempered his divine sense and kept his eyes open for this process of meditation.

He stared at Gou Han Shi who was opposite, not noticing at all that his own face was already bright red and his body scalding, the sweat within his clothing immediately evaporated, leaving behind only faint remnants of salt, looking very miserable.

If nothing happened and his situation was to be the same as in the previous two initial meditations, then even if he didn't burn to death from the horrifyingly high temperatures, his mind would still be damaged to the point of making him disabled.

Yet, since he dared to attempt this, he was obviously hoping for a certain event to happen, as with what he thought of in his match against Zhuang Huan Yu, certain events that have happened before, should logically continue to happen again, something such as rain.

A drizzling sound is the sound of rain crossing through the air. Outside of the tower, there was nothing but clear skies, yet, above the tower, a spell of rain had come, the sound was very gentle, making one want to fall asleep.

The rain fell on the short sword in Chen Chang Sheng's hand and upon the beads of rain coming into contact with the sword's body, they would evaporate into the air without a trace, looking at this, it would seem as if it had seeped into the blade itself.

Even greater amounts of rain fell on Chen Chang Sheng himself, soaking through his clothing, and, upon coming into contact with his skin, it would immediately evaporate, as if it had also seeped into his body.

Accompanying this sudden rain, the heat within the tower was washed away and the temperature dropped. Chen Chang Sheng's body switched between being wet and dry, with countless waves of heat dissipating alongside the steam and his body's temperature gradually falling.

It felt as if the wind that came was refreshing and its caressing of the face akin to a beautiful maiden's hand, giving rise to a pleasant and joyful feeling.

The pleasantness was a physical feeling, while the joy was an acknowledgement of the consciousness.

This rain was something he had hoped for, this spell of rain proved that a lot of people didn't want him to die, just as how he and Luo Luo had previously discussed, His Holiness was currently watching this duel.

The snow plain burned, transforming into a trickling flow, transitioning into True Essence and nourishing his body, supplying him with an even greater amount of power. He gripped the short sword and charged towards Gou Han Shi, in the process of his charge, countless tendrils of white steam trailed from his body, a scene that looked extremely bizarre.

Having taken only three steps forward, he switched to Discerning Steps, the white steam around his body suddenly congregated and then gradually dispersed, within the steam, his figure could no longer be seen.

A violent sword gust sprang up from the wall behind Gou Han Shi, within this, there was an extremely vast and overwhelming

True Essence aura. The sword held in Chen Chang Sheng's grasp also made a reappearance, silently and firmly striking towards Gou Han Shi's back, then transforming into thousands upon thousands of swords.

The rainfall continued; the tip of Chen Chang Sheng's sword became innumerable, being even denser than falling rain. The sword manoeuvre he was using, is the most powerful movement from Zhong Shan's Sword of Rain and Wind: Turbulent Heaven and Earth.

This move was most concerned with might and form, akin to a rainstorm, desiring turbulence for heaven and earth.

Currently, it was raining within the Tower of Purging Dust.

If Chen Chang Sheng wanted to borrow this rain's momentum, he would first have to borrow its might and form.

Innumerable gales flooded in from outside the tower to within, the windows and doors that were open on the second floor relentlessly clattered in the wind, giving out a sound that made others feel a little restless, and resembling a secluded residence that had been left vacant for many years.

The storm suddenly became even more violent and Chen Chang Sheng's sword followed suit, gleaming in all directions, striking towards Gou Han Shi.

The most powerful movement from Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, coupled with the ample True Essence Chen Chang Sheng had obtained after his third undergoing of initial meditation. Even Gou Han Shi should have trouble countering it, wanting to avoid it was also exceedingly difficult.

Gou Han Shi didn't dodge, but silently stood within the real rain and Chen Chang Sheng's storm of swords. He calmly gripped his sword's hilt and held it horizontally across his chest, his eyes didn't reveal any fear, only a calmness that represented his confidence.

His sword was akin to the very last step before arriving at the peak of Li Mountain.

His person was akin to that evergreen tree of unknown species, which stood before Li Shan Sword Sect's main entrance.

That evergreen tree had already existed on Li Mountain for hundreds of years, for many, the reason why that tree could survive was because its luck was especially good. But very few had noticed, that tree, without saying anything, without moving or swaying, had sheltered countless disciples of Li Mountain so that they need not suffer from storms.

Gou Han Shi was that very tree.

He raised his sword to meet Chen Chang Sheng's storm of swords, his expression calm and gentle.

What he used was the Sword of Distant Deliverance.

Upon the second floor, the sound of a sigh from an Archbishop of the Holy Church could be heard: “To be able to utilise that sword art to this degree at only the Ethereal Opening realm, Li Mountain is incredible, Gou Han Shi is even more incredible.”

A sword art that can draw praise from an Archbishop of the Holy Church was obviously not something ordinary.

The storm-like sword forms from Chen Chang Sheng all fell upon empty air, not a single blade landed upon Gou Han Shi’s body.

Unknown as to if Gou Han Shi felt a natural fear against the sword in Chen Chang Sheng’s grasp, or if it was because he felt cautious of Chen Chang Sheng’s sword art, Gou Han Shi didn’t use his sword to directly counter, but had instead use an indirect method.

The sound of blades akin to the rustle of pines, surrounded his body and then spread out far away, completely blocking Chen Chang Sheng’s sword manifestations at an outer perimeter.

Rustling Pines wasn’t a sword art from Li Shan Sword Sect, but is a palm art from one of the bluffs of the Longevity Sect.

Gou Han Shi had used this palm art’s manifestation in a sword technique, the momentum was energetic and simple, having strength without needing a keen edge; Chen Chang Sheng’s sword couldn’t pose any threat to him at all.

A muffled thump could be heard.

Chen Chang Sheng's chest had been pierced by Gou Han Shi's blade, blood spurted out as he fell back, heavily crashing upon the stone wall and then sliding down like mud, unable to stand.

In the next moment, he got back up with much difficulty while holding onto the wall. Staring at Gou Han Shi who was opposite, he remained silent. His face was sickly pale; the confidence he had only just regained previously, rapidly disappeared.

He had never expected that Gou Han Shi's sword would be exactly the same as the person himself; calm and far reaching, simple and free. Seemingly without any power, but being difficult to stand against.

He had burnt away a fragment of snow plain, but still didn't have a chance of victory, then, what should he do?

He thrust out his left hand and wiped away the rain on his face, then, once again raised the sword in front of him.

On the moment his right leg landed upon the puddled water, his divine sense lit up ten fragments of snow plain at the same time. The rain that landed on his body, instantly evaporated and turned into steam.

As if the rain from the heavens above could perceive something, it instantly became even heavier.

Chapter 174 – [TBD]

The snow plain was very thick, unknown as to how deep it went, each snowflake, or perhaps snow fragment, was a strand of Star Brilliance, containing an abundance of energy within.

A single fragment of the snow plain, with a circumference that approached a kilometre, contained tens of thousands of snow fragments, and harboured an untold amount of energy. Upon being lit by his divine sense, they instantly let off immeasurable amounts of light and heat.

Previously, in front the Black Dragon, Chen Chang Sheng had skipped Purification and directly performed Meditation, narrowly avoiding being set ablaze by that light and heat, if it wasn't for the dousing of dragon's blood, he would probably have had an early death.

Earlier, in the match against Zhuang Huan Yu, he had set alight a fragment of snow plain, even though his body was far stronger than it previously was after bathing in dragon's blood, it was still difficult to withstand, if it wasn't for that sudden Autumn rain, he would probably have died.

The light and heat given off by just a single fragment of snow plain was already that horrifying and hard to endure, let alone lighting up ten fragments at the same time, he completely had no way of withstanding it and it was a method that risked his life.

He absolutely had to defeat Gou Han Shi and obtain first upon the First Banner, only with this could he enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist and discover the secret to going against heaven and changing his fate. As with what he had said before, he had to risk his life in order to save his life.

In but an instant, his body became incredibly hot, his temperature reaching unimaginable heights. The rain that fell on him rapidly evaporated, its pitter patter couldn't actually even wet his body in the slightest; in contrast, he began to sweat perpetually, the sweat gushed out thickly, evaporating the moment it came into contact with the surface of his body.

His entire body was cloaked within the white steam; with both, rain and sweat, the smell was rather strange. At the same time, through the fog, it be seen that his face was slightly distorted, extremely peculiar.

With but a moment's work, his clothing had been soaked through and then dried over ten times. No matter how sturdy the material of his clothing was, it couldn't tolerate this continuous cycle.

Upon the rain falling from above the tower suddenly becoming heavier and greater, his clothing immediately split apart from the deluge of water, becoming multiple strips of cloth that were hanging onto his bare upper body, seeming rather comical, but for those up on the second floor, it just looked all the more shocking.

That's right, the rain that fell from above the tower suddenly became extremely heavy, as if it knew he was currently situated on the edge of death, the rain strived its utmost to fall and the sound of its descent could be heard, akin to someone having jabbed a hole in the bottom of the heavenly lake.

The rainwater was also extremely cold, as if it was rain from the end of Autumn that heralded the arrival of snow.

Even so, the cold and violent rain landing on his body couldn't stop his temperature from rising. Amidst the tendrils of white steam, his eyes revealed an expression filled with pain.

The sound of cicadas grew greater outside of the tower, ever shriller and more forlorn.

Within and without the tower, it was akin to two different worlds, two different seasons.

Chen Chang Sheng's flesh ached immensely, as if they were splitting apart, his skin became extremely sensitive, with each raindrop giving him pain that felt like as if he was being flayed. His entire body became as if it was actually burning; though flames could not be seen, the air around his body had already begun to distort, giving a bizarre scene.

The burning of such a fearsome quantity of Star Brilliance alongside such a hard to endure pain still couldn't make him close his eyes, he stared at Gou Han Shi's eyes; the hand that was strapped to his sword became deathly pale. He started to move, slowly, yet firmly, attempting to continue seeking the chance of victory.

He didn't know when he would faint from the pain, or at what time might he be burnt to death, but he had to endure the pain and take the opportunity of his True Essence being far stronger than it had ever been to defeat his opponent.

Gou Han Shi looked at Chen Chang Sheng slowly approaching

along with the white steam, his expression incredibly stern. He lightly shook his right arm and his sword broke through the air, supple, yet incredibly steady, striking towards Chen Chang Sheng.

Within the rainstorm, Chen Chang Sheng's figure suddenly hastened. Using a fearsome speed and Discerning Steps, he avoided that placid, yet powerful sword manifestation. The short sword within his hand borrowed the rain's momentum to strike out towards Gou Han Shi.

Within an extremely short time, the two had exchanged sixteen manoeuvres.

Gou Han Shi's Li Shan Sword Arts were naturally transcendent and powerful, while Chen Chang Sheng's counters were incredibly spectacular.

Occasionally transforming the Staff of Mountain Toppling into a sword art, coupled with countless sword techniques from various sects and academies being casually utilised by him.

Combined with his already deep familiarity with Li Shan Sword Arts, he had actually managed to narrowly block the attacks.

The situation had become tense; those observers on the second floor remained silent, but internally, they had already been captivated by this. Especially in their praises for Chen Chang Sheng, having seen this sword bout, they all thought that Zhuang Huan Yu's loss was definitely not a mistake.

In this battle, Chen Chang Sheng displayed what could only be called a fearsome battle will and an incredible learning ability. It had to be known that from the start, when facing against Zhuang Huan Yu, he had no confidence at all on the way of the sword. Currently, battling against Gou Han Shi who was widely agreed as to being extremely strong in sword arts, his sword technique was actually becoming increasingly sharp, truly transitioning the knowledge he had learnt from cultivation books into real aptitude for battle.

It was a shame then, that Orthodox Academy had steps before its entrance, Li Palace and the tower itself also had steps, even the entire world was filled with these steps and that these steps were a hurdle for countless people.

Before Gou Han Shi there also existed a hurdle, no matter how talented Chen Chang Sheng might be, or how strong his will, it was still something that cannot be skipped across. After all, he had only properly started cultivating for less than a year, and if we were to count from the moment he successfully completed his Purification, then it had only been less than a few months.

With a sharp sound, the rainstorm inside of the tower stopped.

The reason why the rain stopped was because Chen Chang Sheng's temperature had returned to normal.

What was fortuitous was that he hadn't died, but what brought about this fortune was something unfortunate – the True Essence within his body had already been exhausted in this battle.

Silence blanketed the tower.

Gou Han Shi stood in his original position, his right sleeve slightly drooping and his complexion a little pale.

Chen Chang Sheng stood opposite, his tattered clothing was nothing more than strips of cloth, and upon his bare body, he continuously bled.

This battle had finally reached its end, he had completely lost any chance of winning, yet, outside of everyone's expectations, and perhaps, even his own, he didn't feel all that sad, neither did he have any thoughts of grief, rage or bitterness; he felt very calm.

Because he had already tried his best.

In order to continue living, he had pitted his life.

If even this was not enough to succeed, then it could only be said that heaven's way, or perhaps fate, had arranged it as such. He hadn't accepted it, he had tried to challenge it, but he failed; that was all there was to it.

After the ten fragments of snow plain, he had continued with lighting the plains twice more, the last attempt had already completely burnt away all the snow plains. He really had strived his utmost, but it had failed.

He had the right to be calm, perhaps even the right to be proud.

He lowered his gaze to look at his right hand, the short sword was strapped to it.

From start to finish in this battle, his and Gou Han Shi's sword had never actually clashed, this was because Gou Han Shi felt slightly fearful of it, which also made it clear that his ability was still far too low.

He should have the right to be calm, yet why did he feel a slight inability to yield?

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the sword in his hand and silently contemplated.

He then raised his head and his sword, charging towards Gou Han Shi.

He knew that this would be the final time he raised his sword.

It was indeed as such.

Gou Han Shi raised his arm and Chen Chang Sheng was sent flying backwards towards the wall.

While travelling through the air, he felt a little exhausted, a little glad; that's because he could finally stop thinking, finally stop feeling regret; he felt that the deep-blue skies above were a little piercing to the eyes.

He closed his eyes.

But the skies didn't darken.

He saw the burnt and empty, seemingly scorched earth of the snow plains.

He saw the remnants of trickling water upon the wild plains.

He saw something even farther away.

At that location, within the sky, there was a lake suspended.

Only today, did he see clearly, that within the lake, there is actually a mountain.

Chapter 175 – [TBD]

Within Chen Chang Sheng's body, there is a lake.

That's right, it had to be said that it was a lake and not a stretch of water in the form of a lake, that's because this lake was suspended within mid-air; it was not ungenerous, giving the gazer an unhindered and appreciating view.

When Chen Chang Sheng first meditated, he had seen this lake, yet at the time, most of his attention was focused upon the snow plain. The moment he saw this lake, he had been shocked speechless, but he had put it aside temporarily, thus, at the next moment, due to entering a coma after having set the snow plain alight, he hadn't had the chance to carefully examine this lake.

At this time, his divine sense was akin to a gust of wind, traversing tens of thousands of miles in an instant. He passed by the snow plains and arrived before the lake, he could finally observe the lake clearly, but it was hard to describe.

The lake was akin to an immensely large glass ball, transparent and radiant, yet its surface showed the signs of water ripples, making it also resemble a drop of water that had been expanded countless times, a drop of water that could hover in the air, giving an unusually miraculous feel.

Countless rays of light shot into the suspended lake from all directions, then came together at some point deep within the transparent and bright lake water. Closely following, the light rays melded into each other, or perhaps reflected off one another, giving rise to more colourful rays of light, with the scene being

especially dazzling and beautiful.

At first sight, it seemed akin to the Divine State spoken of in myths; upon careful examination, it could be seen that the light rays were variously straight or crooked, forming a mountain within the water.

That mountain had no peak or top; that's because a peak existed upon every direction. No matter from which angle you start to ascend from, the direction you were facing could be considered the peak.

It didn't have a peak, but that mountain still had bluffs and streams, with rugged and strange stones. Upon the mountain, there were countless trees that looked akin to coral, trees that had grown to some inestimable height.

Between the trees and the rocky bluffs, paths could faintly be seen, with those paths being complex, extremely narrow and exceptionally steep.

The wind that had been formed from Chen Chang Sheng's divine sense, upon enter the lake, became slower; revolving around that strange mountain and gazing upon it while being slightly bewildered.

He saw that there vaguely seemed to be a door within a deep section of the mountain path.

Behind the door it was unknown as to if there was a cavern or a miniature world similar to the Education Palace.

Up to this moment, he still couldn't be sure as to what he was facing, but he could already confirm something, the lake water and the snow plain that had already been burnt out, all came from the same place and were of the same nature – that's right, this immense volume of lake water had all come from the real world's night sky and was called Star Brilliance.

That mountain which was surrounded by the lake is his heart.

Clear water followed the lake water's flow and naturally entered. His divine sense reached the mountain, silently alighting between the bluffs and dazzlingly eye-catching trees.

Subconsciously, he understood that everything centred around that door at the end of the mountain path, he wanted to find that door, but the bluffs shrouded it, neither was there any direction of up and down that can be spoken of.

That door constantly flitted in and out of view and he couldn't even confirm its location, let alone get near it.

The lake water lightly swelled and that gust of wind broke through the water, carrying with it a foam that resembled pearls, alighting upon a rock on the mountain. A rustling sound could be heard and he lowered his head to look, all he could see was that his foot had trampled some weeds.

Without any hesitation, Chen Chang Sheng started heading forwards along that steep and narrow mountain path. He was currently in a very mysterious and profound mental state,

without feeling or knowledge, even forgetting where he had come from or where he had to go. All he knew was that he had to continue forwards, that he wanted to find that door.

The path twisted and with but a casual glance, eighteen turns could be seen, the trail was slow and no matter how long he walked for, he still remained upon the mountain.

Without clouds and without end, he started to feel tired, but didn't stop and rest, his foot blistered, but he didn't pay it any attention. He ran along the path, walked, observed, turned back, ran, turned back yet again. This cycle continued, searching from top to bottom.

Time passed by inexorably and he didn't even know how long he had spent running along the path and searching, how much time he had used. Finally, at some moment, he found that path.

The mountain was covered by the lake and didn't have a peak, didn't have up or down, thus, it didn't have any direction, the mountain paths were like a spider's web, impossible to count, but the mountain had water, a lot of water.

The water on the mountain was not the same as the surrounding lake water in being still, but was endlessly flowing, upon reaching some steep precipice, it would fall. The water would pound upon the lake water, raising up a lot of waves and foam.

The water's flow, was the actual path.

Chen Chang Sheng found a tiny waterfall, he didn't pay any

attention to the strange scene of water clashing against water that could be seen as he travelled.

He was incredibly concentrated as he climbed, the reverse flow extended above for three thousand miles and he finally arrived at the end of all the waterfalls on the mountain.

That end should more accurately be described as source.

At the end of everything, water fell and rocks jutted.

Upon the pure white stone that covered the entire mountain and its valleys, there was a door.

It was the very door that he had been painstakingly searching for.

He walked up to the door, and, for the first time, he stilled his steps. At this moment his clothing was already in tatters, his face full of water stains, his shoes broken and ankles injured, looking very ragged, unknown as to how long he had been travelling for.

That wasn't just a simple door, but a grandiose one. In much the same way this wasn't a stretch of lake, but a suspended lake. The latter was because the lake had the form of a droplet, the former was because the door is far too immense.

That door was close to a hundred metres tall, its material resembled gold and jade, but upon closer inspection, it resembled common stone, only being a little pale, being very close to the

mountain stone that surrounded the place.

The stone door's surface emanated a dull and gentle light, giving one a benevolent and safe feeling. All who gazed upon it would be captivated and would want to place their palm upon the door immediately, using their strength to push it open.

However, Chen Chang Sheng felt hesitant, because he felt danger.

He already knew what this mountain is, thus, he could also guess as to what this door was.

What was stranger, was that even though he had never come here before, and of this, he was certain – for some unknown reason, the door gave him a feeling of extreme familiarity, as if he had gazed upon the door for a very long time. Approaching from a different angle, it seemed as if this door had been waiting for him for a very long time.

His hesitation, in actuality, had only lasted a very short while.

Danger couldn't make him stop; in order to continue living, he had already risked his life many times, therefore, what kind of situation can stop him from risking it once again?

His hand landed upon the door and lightly pushed. The door was about a hundred metres tall and from its outer appearance, its thickness should also be rather excessive. Logically speaking, it

should be heavy to the point of resembling a city, yet mysteriously, following his light push, the door had opened.

Chen Chang Sheng retracted his hand, cautiously preparing himself.

The stone door slowly opened and countless rays of light spilled out from inside, landing upon his face and body. His eyes were dazzled to the point of making his vision slightly blurry, while his tattered clothing gleamed with an incredible brilliance, as if it had been set ablaze.

Surprising him, the light was not dangerous at all, but was instead filled with a positive energy, instantly making him feel that his injuries had improved considerably.

His fatigue disappeared, making him feel indescribably relaxed; he felt very strong and his control over many things became unconstrained, to the point where he had a feeling that could be described as “free”.

This type of feeling was very pleasant and this type of temptation was very strong. No kind of uncertainty about the future or the threat of danger could suppress that type of longing; Chen Chang Sheng headed into the direction of the doorway.

Beyond the door, it was a world of light, countless rays took over heaven and earth, flooding his eyes, making it impossible to see anything or make out a direction. He could only head forwards, bewilderingly and nervously.

This time, he didn't walk for long.

The light rays gradually parted and became calm, the shading separated into black and white, then, more colours; such as the colour which represented life and ardour, red; the vast and mysterious blue.

This blue should be representing vastness.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the stretch of blue as he quietly mused to himself.

He then saw several strands of white clouds that were slowly converging with some dark clouds above.

It was only then that he understood what type of blue he had seen; it was the sky's blue.

Following this, he saw black eaves, the second floor's windows, and a beautiful maiden that was wearing court clothes, staring at him from beside the window. He recognised her, he couldn't understand why her brows revealed a sign of worry, but he could at least confirm one thing; his divine sense had returned to the Education Palace.

He had returned to the Tower of Purging Dust.

His body was still in midst of falling through the air.

His divine sense had sought incessantly, for an incredibly long time within his body, but for his body that existed outside in the real world, it was actually only a short instant.

For others, it could be even said that they had only seen him close his eyes and then open them.

Who could have thought, in such a short period of time, that he had experienced so many things and then returned to his original location? Who could have thought that he would no longer be the same person he previously was and that he had already arrived at a brand new world?

His divine sense had opened that door, yet returned to the tower. This demonstrated the fact that his micro heaven and earth had already fully connected with the real world's macro heaven and earth.

The door to his Ethereal Palace had already been opened, though his meridian channels were still broken and hard to traverse, his True Essence will no longer fall into a chasm and disappear. The trickling streams that had been left behind by the snow plain alongside that lake's water, continuously poured into his Ethereal Palace, helping him to continually interact with heaven and earth.

The rainstorm had already stopped, becoming a curtain of drizzling rain. Chen Chang Sheng's body travelled through the rain and his eyes opened. His eyes were bright like lacquer and his mind, incredibly tranquil.

He once again tightly grasped the sword within his hand and through the freshly abundant True Essence inside him, he once

again regained control of his body.

Chen Chang Sheng lightly buckled his knees, tightened his waist, corrected his form and landed upon the floor. His soles suddenly relaxed and then tightened, akin to a stone that has fallen into water; accompanying a light sound, he firmly stood upon the ground.

Closely following this, he unhesitatingly took out a large quantity of pills refined from medicinal reagents obtained from the Hundred Herb Garden and stuck them into his mouth. He quickly chewed and swallowed them, then turned his gaze towards Gou Han Shi.

Gou Han Shi will not underestimate any opponent, especially Chen Chang Sheng, whose ability he had personally seen at the Ivy League gathering. Not to mention, Chen Chang Sheng managing to storm into the final match of the Grand Examination, already evinced too many things.

Yet, after the battle had started, Gou Han Shi found that he had actually yet to make an accurate judgement of Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng had burnt a fragment of snow plain, ten fragments and finally, all the fragments. If his meridian channels didn't have any problems, he would have displayed an even stronger ability, though his current ability had already made Gou Han Shi feel rather shocked.

Fifteen years of age, having only cultivated for less than a year and having Purified through Starlight for an even shorter time, yet possessing such a vast True Essence. Throughout all his years, Gou Han Shi had only seen his senior brother display such an unfathomable achievement, he never could have expected that Chen Chang Sheng would also be able to do this.

Yet, as with what he had said to Qi Jian and his other junior brothers at the guesthouse for Li Mountain, he firmly believed that Chen Chang Sheng would not be able to defeat him and Tian Hai Sheng Xue, that's because Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any way of achieving Ethereal Opening.

Ethereal Opening required at least a hundred nights; drawing Starlight to devoutly knock upon the palace nightly.

Even if it were to be Zhou Du Fu of ages past, he would be no exception.

Chen Chang Sheng hadn't even completed Purification a hundred nights ago, how could Ethereal Opening possibly come into the picture?

Yet, currently, something seemed to be happening.

Gou Han Shi looked at Chen Chang Sheng, he suddenly felt that the praise directed towards him for having read the scriptures in their entirety... was completely meaningless, that's because, even if one was to search through the three thousand scriptures of the way from page to page, you wouldn't find something similar to this.

Chapter 176 – [TBD]

Gou Han Shi's sword pierced through the rain and sent Chen Chang Sheng tumbling through the air, everyone thought that he would once again heavily fall down onto the rainwater and wouldn't be able to rise anymore.

Yet, who could have guessed... he did indeed not rise again, because he never fell, his clothing was in tatters and face pallid, looking very haggard, but he didn't land in an unsightly fashion; his feet were firmly planted, as if he had boundless energy.

An intense and nervous situation couldn't possibly leave too much time for lamentation and shock. Chen Chang Sheng's body leaned forwards and his boots broke through the puddle of water, dashing out as he turned to the Western sky as a line, using Discerning Steps.

He instantly arrived at Gou Han Shi's rear side and his blade carried forward a storm of Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain.

Gou Han Shi's sword was by his side, akin to a boundless rustling of pines, he hadn't left any sort of gap. As if the rustling pine was lightly rippling in the rain, his sword accurately struck upon the broadside of Chen Chang Sheng's short sword.

A sharp ringing sound reverberated from the location where the two swords had crossed, as if it were the ringing of a bell from far away.

The terrifying clash of True Essence caused the rain between them to suddenly billow up, becoming a circle of rain in the air; hundreds of raindrops, akin to sharp arrows, shot out in all directions.

Chen Chang Sheng was sent flying back by the counter shock, akin to an arrow, his body breaking through countless layers of rain and his feet drawing out two extremely straight channels on the accumulated water that was on the green slabs below, continuing until he reached the wall.

But this time, he also didn't fall over, didn't crash upon the wall.

He had firmly come to a stop by his own volition, the hand that held his sword was very firm, even if there wasn't a cloth tied to his wrist, his short sword would probably not leave his hand, it was no longer the same dismal situation as when he first received Gou Han Shi's Three Blades of the Fisherman's Song.

Currently, he was very calm, perhaps even appearing a little serene.

For Gou Han Shi, the hand that held onto his sword's hilt gripped increasingly tight, seeing Chen Chang Sheng who was opposite him, his expression became incredibly stern, with the confusion in his eyes and his shocked state of mind becoming deeper and deeper.

That was because, through that exchange of swords, he could finally confirm that his previous guess was correct, that impossible event had really happened.

His grip was tight to the point that his fingers started to pale, the tip of his sword that was held above his leg was lightly quivering, because in that exchange, Chen Chang Sheng had displayed a level

of power that was completely different; but the bigger reason was due to his current shock.

This was something that had never been recorded within the three thousand scriptures, this was a miracle that had never happened before in the long history of humanity's cultivation; how had he achieved it?

That exchange of swords looked very common and ordinary, but in reality, it was a declaration.

Chen Chang Sheng had informed everyone that he has yet to lose, that he was still in the midst of rising.

The sound of cicadas outside of the tower had long ceased, following his sword manoeuvre, it once again appeared; as if in the markets, and outside of Li Palace, the populace was currently loudly singing, incredibly noisy, making one feel distraught and confused.

In the blue skies above the tower, there were streaks of white clouds, there was also a single raincloud that had completely lost its colour. It had originally shown signs of clearing, yet, who could have expected, following the manoeuvre utilised by Chen Chang Sheng, a clap of thunder faintly echoed within the raincloud and upon the horizon, a beautiful sunset suddenly appeared.

The Tower of Purging Dust was dead silent.

Amongst everyone, including Gou Han Shi; some looked at Chen Chang Sheng in shock; some looked at the sky with bewilderment;

some even seemed rather panicked, thinking about how impossible this all was.

Chen Chang Sheng had actually just achieved Ethereal Opening in such a manner?

That's right, Chen Chang Sheng had already successfully achieved Ethereal Opening.

Everyone only knew that he had yet to complete his Purification at the time of the Ivy League gathering, therefore the time since his Purification and Meditation must be really short.

At most, he should be at the lower stage of the Meditation Realm, being unable to even glimpse the steps for Ethereal Opening, let alone discuss completing it; he was very ordinary amongst the examinees that were participating in this year's examination.

But no one knew Chen Chang Sheng had only used a single night to successfully determine his Fated Star and then started to guide Starlight for Purification.

Counting up to the current date, it had already been close to three hundred days and nights, his guidance of Starlight for Purification had remained unsuccessful, but the Star Brilliance did not dissipate, it had instead, passed through his skin, hair and flesh, directly stowing away within some deep part of his body.

When he first performed Meditation in the underground space, he had previously thought that the thick snow plain was the Star Brilliance which had accumulated for several hundred nights and didn't notice that lake of water.

That lake, with a vast volume of clear water, was the true result

of his guiding Starlight for Purification.

In the underground space, having not completed his Purification, he forcefully risked initial meditation. His body was rent and his blood boiled, even the Black Dragon believed he would definitely die, but no matter how fearsome that inferno of Star Brilliance was, his heart that lay upon the pool of blood still remained as clear and glistening as a fruit, without crumbling; why?

That was because, for those hundreds of night, the Starlight he was guiding didn't actually purify his body, but was instead lightly touching upon his Ethereal Palace every night. Saturating and persistent, becoming a blue lake; Purification? What he had been doing all along was Ethereal Opening.

Without him knowing, that Star Brilliance which had come from the distant red star, continuously entered his body, seeking a path forwards upon that mountain every night, counter observing that stone door – let alone the hundred nights of knocking that was emphasised by Gou Han Shi, it had attentively and firmly knocked for several hundred nights.

That's why, previously, at the door to his Ethereal Palace, he didn't even have to use any force. He had only lightly pushed and managed to open the door to his Ethereal Palace.

Because he's a genius?

That's correct, he did indeed have a lot of talent for cultivation, but more importantly, that door had already been pushed at for far

too many nights and had only lacked a final, conscious push.

He had used inestimable time and effort to dig up the earth and amass a hill, creating a mound of earth that was as high as the Platform of Sweetdew.

All that was needed, was a final scoop of earth on top of it all and he could stand at the highest point in the Capital.

That final scoop of earth was not heavy and tipping it on was very easy. It might look very effortless, and in comparison to the four words “highest in the Capital”, it would definitely seem far too simple, but who could remember the effort and price he had previously expended?

That’s right, this was Chen Chang Sheng’s cultivation.

Due to his meridian channels being broken and due to having an unusual body that cannot Purify, he had relied upon his creative mind and luck, stumbling through a path that was completely different from one others would take.

Purification, Meditation and then Ethereal Opening?

No, before Purification, he had started Meditation.

What was even more outrageous, was that even before Meditation, he had already started Ethereal Opening.

If it could be said that water flowing downwards is a reality for

this world.

Within Chen Chang Sheng's world, water really had always been flowing upwards.

No one knew of his actual condition, or what he had encountered, expended; therefore, with no one knowing his current condition, they obviously couldn't understand why he could complete his Ethereal Opening.

It also had to be known that Ethereal Opening had always been considered the first real hurdle on the long road of cultivation, a stage of life and death that was linked to life and death itself; countless young geniuses that had been judiciously nurtured by their sect or school had fallen before this hurdle.

Countless common cultivators that were loath to accept their fate had also lost their lives, and for the human cultivators upon the continent, at least half of them didn't dare to attempt Ethereal Opening, even for those who succeeded – such as Gou Han Shi for example, or Lady Mo Yu some years ago, how careful had they been at the time of their Ethereal Opening.

Before an actual attempt at breaking through the boundary, a long period of preparation was necessary.

Sects and academies would provide an abundant amount of medicinal pills and experience for helping the cultivator calm their mind and nurture their thoughts.

At the time of attempting to break through, they would have at least three venerable elders and masters guarding vigil by their side, when anything untoward happens, they would immediately

intervene and save the cultivator, as for Chen Chang Sheng... he had achieved Ethereal Opening in the midst of a battle in the Grand Examination.

He had closed his eyes, then opened them and achieved Ethereal Opening.

The feeling he gave a lot of the observers was that, for this youth from Orthodox Academy, Ethereal Opening was as simple as eating breakfast; he said he wanted to eat plain congee, then he cooked a bowl of congee to eat.

In just the previous moment, he had been sure that he wasn't Gou Han Shi's equal, therefore, he decided to do his Ethereal Opening, and thus, he had achieved his Ethereal Opening.

How can such a thing possibly happen in the world? How could such a person exist? If this was all the truth, then what exactly was the ordeal they had suffered all those years ago, that painful waiting of time?

Gou Han Shi did not have this line of thought, but those personages who were up on the second floor couldn't stop themselves from thinking this.

The rainstorm became a drizzle, a pitter patter, but it seemed as if it wouldn't stop for some time yet.

Chen Chang Sheng stood before the stone wall, the expression on his slightly tender face was calm. If one was to look carefully, they might be able to tell a slight difference from before; a little less caution and his eyes becoming a little brighter.

In the past, he had been overly quiet and calm, giving others a feeling of early maturity, as if he were older than his real age by four to five years. At this very moment, he was akin to a bright new morning Sun up in the sky that has emerged after a cleansing of the rain.

Fresh, vibrant, full of a vitality that would rarely appear upon him.

Gou Han Shi did not notice these minor details, he only felt that the current Chen Chang Sheng was a little frightening, perhaps even surpassing the danger Zhe Xiu had given him in the previous match.

Mo Yu looked at Chen Chang Sheng who was standing within the rain on the floor below, a complicated mood appeared upon her look of indifference. The hand which was holding onto the windowsill turned slightly pale, unknown as to what she currently thinking.

Due to some reason, she didn't want Chen Chang Sheng to lose in the examination, but she knew very clearly that Her Divine Majesty didn't want him to win this examination.

Though Her Divine Majesty had never made this clear, a lot of people had quietly acted, ensuring that Chen Chang Sheng would not be able to reach the end.

But there were still a lot of people who stood opposite to Her Divine Majesty.

The Education Board did not need mentioning; Tian Hai Sheng Xue evidently also had an outlook that was completely different from his family's, while Zhe Xiu had risked his life for Orthodox Academy, but the most important factor was, that Autumn rain which would occasionally fall within the tower.

The spells of rain, were representative of His Holiness' attitude.

She had thought that Chen Chang Sheng still wouldn't be able to reach the end, because he lacked the strength. Yet, upon her thinking this, upon her thinking that Chen Chang Sheng had already brought about too many surprises for those gathered here and that any sort of shock would only numb her, he had once again stunned her and everyone present.

Mo Yu once again thought of that night, and subconsciously looked towards that sunset on the edge of the deep blue sky. She thought to herself, "could it be that fate really does exist in this world? Was there really a fortuitous providence that was bestowed by the heavens above?"

In truth, even Chen Chang Sheng himself currently, couldn't completely understand what was going on, why had he suddenly entered the Ethereal Opening realm?

But as he gripped his short sword, facing the drizzle and once again charged towards Gou Han Shi, he didn't even consider if this could be a fortuitous providence bestowed upon him by heaven, this was because heaven had only ever bestowed upon him pain

and never fortune.

Neither did he think of fate, because fate had always been unfair to him, he had never felt any fear, in fact, it was the opposite, what he had always been doing was to challenge fate and defeat it.

He only remembered that this was his 47th time holding the short sword and charging towards Gou Han Shi.

In the previous 45 times, he had lost miserably, falling heavily, with his body covered in rain and blood, yet, he could topple over, but he couldn't collapse.

He would stand up each time and continue to battle, seriously and earnestly striving towards victory.

In the end, he hadn't won, but for the last two attempts, he hadn't fallen.

Therefore, if fate had to be discussed, this couldn't possibly be a blessing from heaven, but was a hidden part of heaven's will, a reward for his previous 45 attempts.

Chapter 177 – [TBD]

If it wasn't a blessing from heaven, nor a sudden reversal of fate, but was instead, a reward, then it would naturally inspire confidence, however, that confidence would only belong to Chen Chang Sheng himself.

Mo Yu would not think this; she would continue to lack any confidence in him.

Chen Chang Sheng had already given her too much surprise and created too many miracles in this year's Grand Examination, having even achieving Ethereal Opening by just closing and opening his eyes in this fierce battle.

She still didn't believe Chen Chang Sheng could win against Gou Han Shi, because for something like miracles, in her twenty odd years of life, she had seen far too many.

Such as the miraculous rise of Zhou Tong; such as Prince Chen Liu, who had ignored the strong objections of court officials and the royal clan alike, insisting upon attempting Ethereal Opening.

Mo Yu knew very clearly that miracles can solve some problems, but they definitely cannot solve all problems.

There is a distance in cultivation length and a difference in discipline arts, even if Chen Chang Sheng had already reached the cultivation level of Gou Han Shi, he still couldn't bridge this kind of gap.

The three representatives of the Southern sects had remained relatively quiet from the start of the Grand Examination, this quietness was probably a form of courtesy and a sign of their

confidence, confidence in the examinees who were from the South, and Gou Han Shi in particular.

Chen Chang Sheng had unexpectedly surprised everyone and suddenly achieved Ethereal Opening, causing their mental state to become tense, but in the next moment, it had returned to being calm, because they were the same as Mo Yu, they still didn't believe that Chen Chang Sheng had much of a chance, their confidence in Gou Han Shi didn't wane in the slightest.

Chen Chang Sheng, who had suddenly achieved Ethereal Opening, could be said to be the strongest amongst those of his age, perhaps even surpassing Xu You Rong, whom was first upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, but he couldn't compare with Gou Han Shi and Qiu Shan Jun.

They might have all completed their Ethereal Opening, but even if they were equals on paper in terms of attainment upon the path of the sword and knowledge on cultivation, the sword training for disciples of Li Mountain was far too strenuous, how could Chen Chang Sheng possibly surpass them in this aspect?

The two Archbishops of the Holy Church were very quiet, partly due to shock, but mainly because of the rain that had fallen earlier. Since that spell of rain, these two heads of the Orthodoxy had spoken very little, even when the Archbishop of the Education Board, Archbishop Mei Li Sha had personally arrived, it didn't cause much of a change to their expressions.

The rain had come from outside of the Green Leaf World, this represented His Holiness' will.

They were His Holiness's confidants, and in the eyes of all believers and court officials, representatives of the Orthodoxy's new faction, that's why they had done their utmost to repress Chen Chang Sheng.

Yet, who could have expected, His Holiness had used those few spells of rain to express his attitude towards Chen Chang Sheng, how could they possibly not be shocked?

As for the battle that was currently ongoing on the floor below, between Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi, they didn't know what kind of attitude they should have, only feeling that after having created so many miracles, perhaps Chen Chang Sheng really does have some hope in achieving something.

The internal state of those personages by the second floor window all differed, only His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, who had just arrived, continued to have the same expression, a peaceful expression – this elderly person had also been shocked to the point of being slightly shaken by Chen Chang Sheng's sudden Ethereal Opening, but he didn't react, because it had yet to end.

Xue Xing Chuan's brow was arched increasingly high, seemingly having found something interesting.

Xu Shi Ji's brow was locked ever tighter together, seemingly having found something especially unexpected and unpleasant.

As countless people up on the second floor had these thoughts, the battle still had to continue.

Chen Chang Sheng charged towards Gou Han Shi for a third time, his steps shifting in unfathomable ways, Discerning Steps broke the rain curtain and entered the minutiae, from the realm of

the stars to the solid earth, arriving before Gou Han Shi without any warning.

He slashed down with his sword; the True Essence imbued upon the blade was extremely potent, while the sound of cicadas outside of the tower suddenly intensified. The faint lightning within that raincloud in the blue sky above boomed as it descended, filled with unimaginable power.

After achieving Ethereal Opening, his ability had indeed risen considerably.

Facing this sword, Gou Han Shi continued to remain calm. There were no longer any remnants of the shock from Chen Chang Sheng's Ethereal Opening on his plain looking face.

He gripped onto his sword of unknown worth, twisting his wrist and lightly lifting; breaking through the air, all that could be seen was the tip of his blade suddenly raising a rotund Sun, illuminating the tower's walls.

At the fore of the blade's edge, it was as if there really was a Sun rising.

It wasn't a sunset that carried with it the scent of blood, neither was it an incredibly refreshing dawn, it was the fiercest, brightest and most splendid Sun of noon; a blazing Sun that was impossible to look at directly.

Gou Han Shi's strongest is Three Blades of the Fisherman's Song? No, as a disciple of Li Shan Sword Sect, how could he possibly only have a single boat to dwell upon in the boundless path of the sword that was akin to the sea? This move was his actual strongest sword.

Seeing the Sun upon the sword, Chen Chang Sheng's expression became stern, but his steps did not slow in the slightest. Conversely, sounds of exclamation had come from the second floor window side, with those sounds full of shock and uncertainty.

“Golden Crow; how could this be possible?”

“The Golden Crow returns to Li Mountain, could it be, has that person returned?”

Gou Han Shi's move was Li Shan Sword Sect's Secret Sword of the Golden Crow, something that had been severed for hundreds of years. It was rumoured, only that legendary junior uncle of Li Mountain knew this sword art, who would have thought, that this type of powerful sword art that can incinerate the vast expanse, would actually reappear upon this world in this year's Grand Examination.

Following the appearance of that Sun on the tip of Gou Han Shi's sword, the heavens and earth suddenly had a change in hue. Within the tower, it was illuminated as if it were daytime, the drizzle from above became streams of jade. Outside of the tower, the sunset upon the horizon instantly dispersed. That Sun in the heavens above which had been sitting angled, seemingly returned to the centre of the sky, emanating countless scorching rays. The entirety of the tower, including the trees

outside and the rain within, seemed to have all been set ablaze at the same time, as if they had been plated with a layer of gold.

Unquestionably, this sword was the supreme skill of Li Shan Sword Sect, its most powerful ability.

Within the same level, how could a method possibly be found to counter it?

Even if it were Orthodox Academy at its greatest time, those well learned and high levelled academy elders and teachers would not be able to find any method to counter that junior uncle of Li Mountain's secret sword, let alone the current Chen Chang Sheng.

No one believed that Chen Chang Sheng would be able to counter this sword from Gou Han Shi.

Yet, he still gripped his sword and headed forward, quiet and concentrated, as if he couldn't see that bright Sun in the skies above or the Sun on the tip of Gou Han Shi's sword, neither seeing that the tower had already been covered with a layer of gold.

Upon his still tender looking face, there was an incontestable determination and surety. The personages who saw this expression, had an indescribable feeling; it seems as if he really did have a method for countering that move.

It also seems, he felt that he could easily counter it.

Gou Han Shi also saw Chen Chang Sheng's expression, the surety between his eyes; watching that youth who was coming towards him with a swift sword in hand. Gou Han Shi even had the feeling that he could see the spirit worthy of a sovereign descending upon the world.

If it were any other time, he would immensely admire Chen Chang Sheng's strong will and mental strength.

But this time, he was very angry.

Because Chen Chang Sheng couldn't possibly counter this move.

Chen Chang Sheng's attitude, was akin to an insult towards Li Shan Sword Sect and that legendary junior uncle.

Chapter 178 – [TBD]

How would Chen Chang Sheng counter the Secret Sword of the Golden Crow? Why was he acting so confident?

Was it because the full form of Li Shan's Sword Arts was currently at Orthodox Academy and he knew their swords arts like the back of his hand?

No, this secret sword was a legacy of that legendary junior uncle, that junior uncle's complex relationship with Li Shan Sword Sect and the entire Longevity Sect meant that this sword art wasn't entered into the full manual, thus, Chen Chang Sheng definitely would not have seen it before.

Though Gou Han Shi was slightly enraged, he had thought of this point, therefore he was even more confused, those personages up on the second floor also couldn't understand, having indescribable expressions.

Chen Chang Sheng was indeed unable to counter this powerful move, he clearly knew this, but this didn't mean he had to concede defeat, because apart from countering, there are a lot of methods to face it.

His wrist twirled akin to a falling leaf, and the short sword cut through the curtain of rain, becoming a thin line of rain, slanting from the lower right upwards, slashing towards Gou Han Shi.

He had never intended to counter Gou Han Shi's sword, neither had he intended to block it or dodge, he completely ignored the sword and only quietly concerned himself with his own blade's movement.

With the scorching Sun above, the remnants of rain inside of the tower became countless, dense, golden strands. Several golden strands fell upon Chen Chang Sheng's face, but these couldn't even make him blink. He stared at Gou Han Shi's face and continued advancing, his speed suddenly increased once more, arriving before Gou Han Shi's body like a flash of lightning.

He was using Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, not the most powerful movement of Turbulent Heaven and Earth, but the most absolute, most unrelenting seventh movement: A Fervent Blade.

Being fervent and generous is opposed to being miserly, but the word fervent could also be used for other situations. A situation such as fervently meeting death; this word, at times, could represent a certain spirit, manner, presence; the spirit of disregarding life and death.

Chen Chang Sheng's body and sword encapsulated this spirit, completely ignoring the Sun upon Gou Han Shi's blade, ignoring the most mysterious and powerful sword art of Li Shan Sword Sect, ignoring all these things and rushing ahead.

If Gou Han Shi didn't change his manoeuvre, then Chen Chang Sheng would undoubtedly be cleaved apart at the next moment by the technique, but at the same time, Chen Chang Sheng's sword would also slice apart Gou Han Shi's chest.

The seventh movement from Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain had a fervent presence, though it didn't have as much power as the Secret Sword of the Golden Crow, Gou Han Shi would

probably die or be heavily injured upon receiving this strike; the problem was, no one knew what the result might be.

The personages up on the second floor could tell what Chen Chang Sheng's intent was and let out cries of alarm.

Gou Han Shi could perceive it more clearly, within but a moment, countless thoughts filled his head – Chen Chang Sheng wanted to pit their lives against each other, determining who had the better chance of living, this was naturally something he wouldn't accept; he was stronger, and thus, had an inherent advantage.

Li Shan's sword struck out horizontally, the Golden Crow's sword momentum immediately transitioned into a defensive stance.

The two swords still didn't touch, the rustle of pines once again appeared, extremely densely.

Chen Chang Sheng's Fervent Blade didn't have any chance of approaching Gou Han Shi's vitals.

All that could be heard was a loud ringing sound within the tower, its reverberations dispersing in all directions, Chen Chang Sheng was sent flying backwards while tumbling, spinning in the air several times before landing upon the ground, his boots stamping out several rippling flower patterns upon the water.

Silence filled the tower. Those up on the second floor looked at Chen Chang Sheng with complex expressions, such a powerful and terrifying Secret Sword of the Golden Crow was actually countered

by Chen Chang Sheng using such a simple method.

Of course, in actuality, this wasn't simple in the slightest.

If Chen Chang Sheng hadn't chosen the sharpest and most unyielding movement from Zhong Shan's Sword of Wind and Rain, conveying an incredibly repressive feeling to Gou Han Shi, while ensuring he didn't reveal any sort of weakness in his state of mind, how could he have forced Gou Han Shi to abandon such an advantageous position?

Chen Chang Sheng once again swiftly lunged forwards, his short sword carrying with it a crisp cutting sound, slicing through the air to strike at Gou Han Shi.

His face didn't have any sort of expression, the vitality and refreshing feeling that had previously appeared, was akin to a misconception, with his face once again becoming quiet and stoic, yet remaining resolute.

What kind of sword was this? Those observing the match continuously tried to guess.

Gou Han Shi raised his sword and broke through the air, carrying with it a horrifying force of True Essence, directly scattering the countless layers of rain that was slowly falling within the tower, his sword manifestation travelled from all directions, striking towards Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng's expression didn't change, remaining the same as it had been before. He didn't even give a glance or pay it any attention, focusing all his concentration upon his own sword to a terrifying degree and striking out with a thrust.

A sharp and mournful sword wail rang out within the tower.

His technique was not as transcendent as Gou Han Shi's, but it was far simpler, with his thoughts even more so. It looked as if he had struck out first, but he had actually struck last, in the end, both swords arrived at the same time, howling as they crossed.

The two blades still didn't have the chance to meet.

It remained life against life, a state of mutual destruction.

Gou Han Shi let out a single hiss, the hiss was filled with anger and a faint sense of frustration.

The Li Shan Sword within his hand became akin to a multitude of blossoming flowers.

"A Brocade of Blossoms," a gasp came down from the second floor.

At the very last moment, Gou Han Shi had changed his manoeuvre, but it still followed the momentum, turning the rain into a multitude of blossoms; with a single move, he had instantly

left behind several sword wounds upon Chen Chang Sheng's shoulder.

This manoeuvre of a changing sword was exquisitely sublime, and could be said to fully demonstrate Li Shan Sword Sect's standard and level, however, it was nevertheless a change at the last moment and inevitably lacked a little in might and spirit.

Though his Brocade of Blossoms manoeuvre had injured Chen Chang Sheng, it couldn't defeat him, at the same time, his own upper left arm had been gashed open by Chen Chang Sheng's sword.

After entering the Ethereal Opening realm, Chen Chang Sheng had crossed swords against Gou Han Shi twice, they would all end with this type of result. He was using swift and fierce manoeuvres that aimed for mutual destruction, as if he had never considered being able to defeat his opponent.

The two of them stood at opposite ends of the tower, calmly observing each other, silent and wordless. Between them there were countless layers of rain, as if it were veiling many things and obscuring their respective visages.

Gou Han Shi's expression was grave, because he was certain as to what Chen Chang Sheng wanted to do.

Chen Chang Sheng grasped the blade in his hand and nodded his head in acknowledgement to the faraway Gou Han Shi, a conveyance of apology.

That's right, he was not Gou Han Shi's equal, no matter how strenuously he had trained, how high his talent or how many scriptures of the way he had read, he was still inferior to Gou Han Shi.

That's because Gou Han Shi's training was also strenuous, his talent was also high and he had also read all the scriptures. With Gou Han Shi's age being greater than Chen Chang Sheng's, he had also cultivated for a longer time.

Even if Chen Chang Sheng was to seek desperately, using the battles of the examination to constantly improve himself, to the point of having achieved Ethereal Opening with that manner which could shock the world, he still couldn't possibly be Gou Han Shi's equal in battle.

Failing at Purification and then continuing to purify, risking his life to meditate and then continuing to undergo multiple initial meditations, all until he had inexplicably achieved Ethereal Opening. All of this was still insufficient for defeating a strong opponent in terms of cultivation level, this feeling seemed a little bitter, but Chen Chang Sheng didn't think like this.

He wasn't disappointed, neither did he lose hope, rather, he was full of confidence over being able to obtain victory in this match, because he had currently obtained the qualifications to pit life against life with Gou Han Shi.

Before obtaining this increase of level, before achieving Ethereal Opening, the difference between him and Gou Han Shi was far larger, wanting to die with his opponent was something he

couldn't even do, currently, at the very least, he had obtained that right.

This was enough.

Because no one else had as much experience in facing death as he does.

In other words, no one feared death as much as he did, nor remained as fearless of death as he.

Gou Han Shi couldn't understand Chen Chang Sheng's strength in this aspect, but he could perceive it, therefore, if he wished to defeat Chen Chang Sheng, then he also had to bring out what he was strongest with.

“Try this manoeuvre of mine,” he said to Chen Chang Sheng, he then calmly walked forward, his steps firm and slow, his gaze becoming increasingly bright, as if he had returned to the time when he was still but a child studying at a rural school.

Gou Han Shi's manoeuvre was very simple, from above to below, a slash across.

It was perhaps even a little shabby.

But that manoeuvre was not ordinary in the slightest, with the movement above it reached the deep-blue heavens, with the movement below it reached the golden earth; between heaven and

earth it was this sword, this strike belonged to reality's fragmentary world.

However, this manoeuvre really was extremely shabby.

Those seeing this move and perceiving its manifestation all felt a little sorrowed.

Everyone could see their own bitter experiences of the past.

Gou Han Shi saw even more, because this was a manoeuvre he had created himself.

He saw the poverty of his family back in his childhood; his mother made a living by washing the clothes of relatives from the same clan, he himself didn't have any money to enter the village school, having to kneel at the door of that teacher who had a triangular beard for an entire night.

After entering the village school, he could study, but he didn't have money for a stove.

The chill wind from outside the window was cold to the bone; this represented his strenuous studies. Neither did he have any dinner, only being able to cook a pot of cold gruel every morning, and cutting it into two once it hardened, one piece per meal; this represented eating coldly.

Strenuously studying for ten years, then how many did he spend on eating coldly?

Upon the motions of that manoeuvre, Gou Han Shi really had thought of a lot of things.

Poverty really was the most horrifying thing in the world. How did he manage to endure until entering Li Shan Sword Sect? Endure to this point? Wasn't it precisely for this battle?

That's right, that manoeuvre was the same blade he had used to cut the cold rice gruel.

At the moment Gou Han Shi had raised his blade, Chen Chang Sheng's expression changed.

Before even seeing the manoeuvre, he could perceive the move's quality, no, more accurately, the move was an unavoidable human affair.

Gou Han Shi had already utilised two sublime and powerful sword manoeuvres which he had used two death seeking charges to counter, yet, facing this current move, he had the thought that it was difficult to surmount.

Because this move was something he couldn't overcome, if he wanted to achieve mutual destruction, then firstly, their swords had to meet.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't want the short sword in his hand to meet Gou Han Shi's Li Shan sword, because once they clashed, it

would cause a change, this inquiry on the way of the sword was something he couldn't be as accurate as Gou Han Shi in.

At the start, it was Gou Han Shi who did not want their swords to meet, currently, the positions had reversed.

What should he do?

The observers on the second floor were currently shocked with the marvel of Gou Han Shi's bitter sword. Closely following this, Chen Chang Sheng's move stunned their very minds, with cries of exclamation continuously erupting.

Chen Chang Sheng stamped his foot to the side, his step breaking the water that had accumulated on the green slabs below, his bent elbow carried a spray of rainwater; it remained a straight thrust, with the short sword carrying a faint golden glimmer, piercing towards Gou Han Shi.

A faint blood scent appeared within the tower.

That scent came from the wounds on both, him and Gou Han Shi, and also came from the blood of previous examinees that had participated in the duelling phase, but most of the scent came from his sword art.

"Isn't this the Orthodoxy's Perfect Sword...?" muttered one of the Archbishops of the Holy Church as their expression suddenly turned severe.

Xu Shi Ji could no longer maintain his silence and said, in a stern and reprimanding manner: “Hasn’t that move already been banned?”

Star Seizer Academy’s principal said: “It should still remain within the library of Orthodox Academy.”

The Orthodoxy’s Perfect Sword that Chen Chang Sheng was currently using, had an even more well-known name, it is called the Sword of Slaughter and was the secret sword of one of the academy’s previous principals. It was said that many years ago, when that principal who had fell on the path of slaughter was forcefully suppressed by His Holiness, The Pope, the sword art had actually managed to heavily injure His Holiness.

If it could be said that Gou Han Shi’s sword manoeuvre consisted of being miserly and resolute, then this sword manoeuvre used by Chen Chang Sheng consisted of slaughter and insanity.

With two such swords crossing each other, who would gain the upper hand?

The remaining rain within the tower suddenly dispersed, the wet sand that remained upon the floor, leapt into the air.

Two sword gusts entwined incessantly, its force seeping out in all directions. The black eaves continuously resounded in the wind.

Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng had already separated, bleeding ever more blood, sustaining ever more injuries.

No one had clearly seen what previously happened, but those two swords probably didn't meet.

Mo Yu's gaze shifted down, falling upon the footprint in front of Gou Han Shi, confirming that he was actually the first to have retreated, she couldn't stop herself from feeling rather shocked, with her fine brows lightly arching, complex overtones appeared within her eyes, but the edge of her lips lifted.

It was silent within the tower, with everyone being endlessly shocked.

Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong didn't come to participate in this year's examination, and a lot of people inevitably opined the thought that the examination would lose much of its lustre, yet who could have guessed, that this battle in the examination would actually be to this degree.

From the start till now, Chen Chang Sheng and Gou Han Shi had already crossed swords close to half a hundred times, yet their blades had still never really clashed, however, they had sustained many injuries, on some occasions being only an instant away from death itself.

This kind of will and ability, this kind of cultivation on the sword, it really did make others speechless with admiration.

Just what kind of cultivation do those two practise? How could

they grasp so many secret swords that are close to being lost? Gou Han Shi had even self-created such a flawless sword art.

Of course, for the observers, they could rely upon the advantage of their cultivation and level to ignore Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng's manoeuvres, relying upon strength to crush them, but what if they were of the same level?

It had to be known that both Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng were yet to reach twenty years of age, for them to know such a large quantity of sword arts, knowing when to select which manoeuvre and making the near perfect choice, this kind of ability made others rather dumbfounded.

Chen Chang Sheng especially, had grasped such powerful and severe moves that were only concerned with mutual destruction, continuously performing them. What was more frightening was that everyone could clearly see from that youth's choices and sword manifestations that he wanted to take first place, and that he would even disregard death in order to achieve it.

"If this continues, someone is going to die," said Prince Chen Liu as he looked at everyone else present.

They all knew that what he said was the truth and they also felt rather worried. They could obviously stop this frenzied battle from continuing further, but first place for the examination had yet to be decided, how could Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng possibly agree?

If a victor had to be judged – Chen Chang Sheng had relied upon seeking victory through death, how could he be judged as to losing?

An extremely powerful manoeuvre.

Chen Chang Sheng thought of that shabby sword manoeuvre of Gou Han Shi's, that went from the heaven to the earth, silently contemplating. If Gou Han Shi hadn't retracted his move at the last moment, he really might have lost by now.

"Why did you retreat in the end?" he looked at Gou Han Shi and asked seriously.

Gou Han Shi gave it a thought and said: "That manoeuvre of mine is for cutting cold rice gruel."

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent for a while, then asked: "And then?"

"The cold rice gruel of those years were made by my mother."

"Then?"

Gou Han Shi continued: "She still lives; therefore, I must also live on."

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent for a long time, then said: "I'm sorry."

"How about you? What are you doing this for?" Gou Han Shi

looked at him and asked: “First upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination, is it really that important for you? Even more important than life and death?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied with a question of his own: “What about you? How important is it to you?”

Gou Han Shi replied: “For all cultivators, this honour is important, not to mention our sect has already taken first place three times in a row. I can’t possibly allow myself as the second senior brother to end it.”

“So it is as such.”

After giving it a thought, Chen Chang Sheng said: “I’m sorry, but first place is far more important for me, therefore I cannot withdraw, I have no retreat. This is inherently unfair to you.”

Gou Han Shi said: “I don’t really understand your meaning, but for some reason I can sort of sense it.”

Chen Chang Sheng raised the short sword in his hand, pointing it in Gou Han Shi’s direction and said: “In my previous match, Zhuang Huan Yu said to me, the barefooted doesn’t fear those wearing shoes. Thinking back on it, he was right.”

Golden sand lightly flew in the air, the cry of cicadas outside became more urgent and clouds streaked across the sky restlessly. Seeing his stance and sensing his sword manifestation, Gou Han

Shi could vaguely guess something and his expression changed.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at him and said, extremely seriously: “I really don’t have a path of retreat, neither do I have anything to lose, therefore, even if I am wearing shoes, I am still a child that fights barefooted.”

Gou Han Shi said: “For people like us, shoes are inherently a luxury.”

“That’s why I have to apologise to you,” said Chen Chang Sheng.

Outside of the tower, Tang Thirty-Six had given him a very clear battle plan: first, move others through emotion; then persuade others through reason; finally, defeat others through strength. The most important part was to attack their feelings, then comes the sword.

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t do this, it wasn’t till now that he had finally conversed with Gou Han Shi earnestly, because this represented respect. The reason for starting this conversation now, was because he could sense the next manoeuvre will decide the victor.

Gou Han Shi asked: “For the next manoeuvre, I’m preparing to use the Master’s Blade, what about you?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “Li Shan Sword Arts’ final move.”

Gou Han Shi came to know that he had guessed correctly.

He remained silent for a very long time, gazing at the blue heavens above, feeling a little hungry, wanting to eat a little rice gruel.

After a long time, he shook his head, returned his sword to its scabbard and turned, leaving the Tower of Purging Dust.

Within the tower, only Chen Chang Sheng remained. He looked at the empty arena, looked at the grey wall opposite and slightly tilted his head, seeming to be rather bewildered.

It was very quiet, without any sort of sound.

His gaze persisted for a long time before he finally regained his senses, feeling rather tired, wanting to rest for a while.

He retreated backwards a few steps, getting closer to the wall, slowly returned his short sword to its scabbard. He then sat down, wiping his forehead, but it was hard to determine what was on his sleeve, be it blood or sweat.

Chapter 179 – Sunset, Yet A First Dawning

It was very quiet in the tower, whether be it on the floor above or the floor below.

No one knew what kind of evaluation should be given to this match; it wasn't until after a long period of time, did His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, sigh and say: "Amazing."

This word was directed at Chen Chang Sheng and also Gou Han Shi – Chen Chang Sheng was amazing because of his tranquillity when facing the terror of death; to be tranquil to the point of being aloof and thus, fearsome.

Gou Han Shi was amazing because, when faced with the most important point of a cultivator's journey in life, he could remain calm and collected, using reason to exchange the ardency of youth into a type of power, the power to relinquish.

As such, the last duel of this year's Grand Examination drew to a close, with Gou Han Shi's withdrawal from the match; the Grand Examination had its first upon the First Banner, however, the personages continued to have complex moods, complex and hard to articulate.

The drizzle slowly ceased, with a few wisps of clouds remaining in the skies of the Education Palace; morning rays gradually increased in intensity, spilling in from the windows and falling upon everyone's faces.

Archbishop Mei Li Sha was expressionless, as if he was empty of

thought.

Mo Yu was expressionless, unknown as to what she was thinking.

Xu Shi Ji was also expressionless; a lot of people could guess as to what was currently going through his mind.

The two Archbishops of the Holy Church had expressionless faces, because they didn't know what they should be thinking.

Gou Han Shi walked out of the tower and stood atop the steps; he didn't pay any attention to the gazes that turned towards him, neither did he rush to meet and talk to his junior brothers that were waiting ahead, instead, he directed his gaze towards the sky above.

In the real world, at a location deep inside Li Palace, His Holiness, The Pope, looked at the beads of water that were upon the Green Leaf, he shook his head, then took out a handkerchief from within his sleeve and carefully wiped away the water.

Accompanying the slow movement of His Holiness' hand, the skies within the Education Palace also began to change.

Gou Han Shi looked at the rainclouds being swept away; the heavens once again returning to an azure blue, with this, his mind became widened anew and the depressive mood that had sprung from those last few sword manoeuvres in the tower, gradually dissipated.

Outside of the tower, all the examinees stared intently at the door above the steps.

They all saw Gou Han Shi walking out; momentarily after, Chen Chang Sheng also came out... more accurately speaking, he was carried out by the Li Palace clergy on a stretcher, then, the clergy announced the final result.

Chen Chang Sheng had won?

This youth from Orthodox Academy has really taken first upon the First Banner?

It was dead quiet in the area surrounding the tower; then, an explosive sound rang out.

For the remaining examinees at the match grounds, their expressions became extremely unsightly, especially for those who had mocked Chen Chang Sheng incessantly at the divine avenue some days ago, those students of Temple Seminary and Li Palace College.

That young junior from Holy Maiden Peak, Ye Xiao Lian, was especially shocked, to the point of not knowing what she could say.

From the woodlands, there suddenly erupted chaotic bawls.

Tang Thirty-Six, Luo Luo and Xuan Yuan Po ran towards the front of the tower.

After arriving at the tower and confirming the result of the match, Tang Thirty-Six remained silent for a moment, then started laughing boisterously. While he was laughing, he intentionally strut out his waist with his hands, gazing at those examinees below who had previously mocked Chen Chang Sheng, with his laughter being remarkably arrogant; because he really did feel very exultant, very proud.

Xuan Yuan was similarly also very excited, exuberant to the point of being gobsmacked, his face was dyed red, with his stubble seemingly wanting to pierce through his skin and sprout out. He raised his pot-sized fist towards Chen Chang Sheng's chest, whom was lying on the stretcher, to bump upon it.

Chen Chang Sheng was currently suffering from heavy injuries, if he were to take such a blow, what kind of result will it have?

Luckily, Xuan Yuan Po's fist was blocked by a small hand – Luo Luo crouched by the side of the stretcher and retracted her left hand; seeing Chen Chang Sheng, alongside his pallid face and blood covered body, her face was etched with worry.

“I promised myself and all of you that I will definitely win.”

Chen Chang Sheng grasped her right hand, looked at her and said: “I’ve won.”

When saying those words, the edge of his lips were raised very high; his smile very oafish.

Tang Thirty-Six turned and looked at his appearance, saying, in a worried voice: “He hasn’t been beaten silly right?”

At that moment, Guan Fei Bai’s voice suddenly erupted from the front of the tower: “How can this be?”

His voice was very cold and infuriated.

He couldn’t possibly accept that his second senior brother would lose to Chen Chang Sheng.

Previously, they had already seen a lot of phenomena outside of the tower, but no matter what, he couldn’t find the reason for his senior’s loss to Chen Chang Sheng... not to mention, Gou Han Shi currently didn’t have any major injuries and could still calmly stand atop the steps, while Chen Chang Sheng was laid on a stretcher, his body covered in blood.

Under these circumstances, how could it possibly be Chen Chang Sheng’s victory?

The paved area outside of the tower suddenly became exceedingly quiet.

Countless gazes gathered upon Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng.

There were a lot of people that had the same thought as Guan Fei Bai. Unless Gou Han Shi was to acknowledge that he had lost, or someone could bring out a reason that can persuade them all, they would all suspect that something dubious was going on for this match.

Gou Han Shi raised his right hand, indicating that his junior brothers need not say anything else.

Chen Chang Sheng, under the support of Luo Luo, sat up, looked at Gou Han Shi and sincerely said: "Thank you."

Gou Han Shi remained silent for a long time, repeating the entire match from start to finish in his mind, confirming that there wasn't anything he overlooked, before saying: "Your victory was logical, why would you need to thank me?"

Chen Chang Sheng said: "I'm not your equal, I only managed to take a small advantage."

Gou Han Shi understood Chen Chang Sheng's reasoning, he shook his head and said: "For a battle, all aspects are important; even if you were to have 99 aspects out of 100 in which you are inferior to me, as long as you have 1 aspect that surpasses me, it's still a victory."

Silence covered the area outside of the tower and confusion filled the faces of Guan Fei Bai, Qi Jian and Liang Ban Hu, not understanding what Gou Han Shi was referring to: how could one

lose in 99 aspects, but be adequate by winning in only 1 aspect?

“Because that is the most important aspect.”

Gou Han Shi spoke as he looked at Chen Chang Sheng, explaining to his three juniors at the same time: “Akin to a wooden barrel, the most important part will always be the shortest board; being weaker than you in that aspect, I am inferior in all respects.”

What aspect was the most important? Gou Han Shi and Chen Chang Sheng were the only ones that knew it was their views on life and death. After hearing those words, Chen Chang Sheng remained silent for a while, before saying: “I still need to say I’m sorry.”

Gou Han Shi laughed, but didn’t continue the discussion, he looked at Guan Fei Bai and said: “I... feel a bit hungry.”

Guan Fei Bai still couldn’t understand what happened in the match, but since his senior had already conceded defeat, his prideful nature meant he obviously wouldn’t persist on the topic, he was only worried about his senior’s current mood; he tried his best to make his voice gentler and calmer, asking: “Senior brother, what do you want to eat?”

Gou Han Shi considered for a moment, then said: “Rice gruel.”

Liang Ban Hu said: “It should almost be dark outside; I don’t know if it’ll be easy to find any.”

Qi Jian said: “If it’s leftover from the daytime, then we have to worry about it being cold.”

Gou Han Shi replied: “Cold is delicious.”

With just a few, remarkably ordinary words, the four disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect had accepted this match’s result, heading out of the Education Palace; they were powerful and thus, prideful youths; the reason for their pride.

The Divine State’s Seven Laws were the Divine State’s Seven Laws.

“Let’s also leave,” said Luo Luo.

Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po took the stretcher off the hands of the Li Palace clergy.

It was at that moment, Mo Yu left the tower and arrived before the group from Orthodox Academy, she formally greeted Luo Luo, then looked towards Chen Chang Sheng and said: “Congratulations.”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “Thank you.”

Mo Yu’s fine brows arched slightly, and she said, with much profundity: “I only hope this really is something to celebrate.”

By this time, all the examinees outside of the tower already knew of the identity of this enchantress that was garbed in court gowns, and they all began to conduct formal greetings in turn, yet, even before they could come up to greet her, Mo Yu had promptly taken her leave.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others pondered over the words she had left behind; their originally exuberant mood was suddenly clouded over, but they didn't have the time to muse over it more deeply, because closely following this, others had arrived.

Xue Xing Chuan and Prince Chen Liu walked out of the tower and came over, congratulating the four students from Orthodox Academy.

Prince Chen Liu expressing cordial wishes was understandable, but, as Her Divine Majesty's most trusted Divine General, Xue Xing Chuan had no reason to do this at all; this caused Chen Chang Sheng and the others to feel all the more stunned.

Once His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, left the tower and came to their location, everyone knew that there shouldn't be any more personages making an appearance; because the elderly person directly said: "Let's leave the palace together."

It wasn't a question, but counted as an invitation, prohibiting any sort of refusal, neither was there any reason to refuse.

By now, the entire continent knew that Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy are representatives advanced by the tradition

faction of the Orthodoxy, not to mention, it had to be acknowledged that if this elderly person and the Education Board he controlled had not secretly provided assistance, Chen Chang Sheng would not have had any chance of obtaining first upon the First Banner.

Therefore, whether if he were to acknowledge it or not, Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy had already established an unbreakable relationship with this elderly personage, hence, all they could now do, is to accept.

Luo Luo's situation was rather unique, at this rather sensitive time, she couldn't possibly appear with Mei Li Sha before the crowds outside of Li Palace, this was because she represented the stance of the yao race; in the human race's struggles and conflicts, she had to be very cautious, to the point where she couldn't reveal any sort of position.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at her and said, in consolation: "It's fine, you should return first, we'll meet again at the academy."

Luo Luo's unhappy mood slightly lessened, she held his hand and said: "Then Sir, take care of your injuries."

Having taken medicine and received a round of treatment, Chen Chang Sheng no longer had to lie upon the stretcher, he was supported by Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po as they followed His Eminence out of the Education Palace.

Luo Luo was currently staying in the Education Palace and thus,

didn't need to leave, she only needed to see them off.

Not long after, one elder and three youths, totalling four people, walked out of the Hall of Clear Virtue.

Taking in everything within sight, all that could be seen was the red tinted skies in the sunset, with the night fast approaching. They discovered that it was actually already the second day's evening; the Grand Examination had already continued for two days and one night.

Thinking of this, they couldn't stop themselves from feeling fatigued; a sudden onset of lethargy.

Outside of Li Palace, it was teeming with people; a stretching dark mass.

The populace that were here to observe the excitement were loath to leave, with a lot of the crowd anxiously grasping onto the gambling slips in their hands, awaiting the final result. Surrounding the stone pillars, a lot of teachers and Elders from various academies and sects were waiting for the examinees to come out.

The Grand Examination had finally ended and the final results had already been announced.

Those teachers and elders, in addition to being shocked, were in the end, most concerned with the status of their own examinees.

The examinees streamed out of the Hall of Clear Virtue one after the other, following the divine avenue towards the outside of Li Palace to meet their family and teachers; this gave rise to many different situations.

Some examinees yelled out repeatedly, their family crying from surprise and joy

Some examinees had dark expressions, whilst their family constantly consoled them.

Some examinees appeared dazed, with their academy teachers harshly reprimanding them.

With more and more examinees leaving the Education Palace, it gradually became quiet outside of Li Palace.

After leaving the Hall of Clear Virtue, the four disciples of Li Shan Sword Sect directly entered the guesthouse and didn't appear again, but the crowd still continued to wait for something.

The slanting Sun sank to the West, as if the sunset was naught but a dream. Above the divine avenue, the stone steps towered.

Chen Chang Sheng was supported by Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po, slowly descending the steps.

His Eminence was to the rear, by the side.

Within and without Li Palace, it was silent.

The sunset fell upon the stairs, creating a span of tepid red; a stark contrast from the morning.

Chapter 180 – Stay Your Steps Banner Lead

Illuminating the world and bringing warmth alongside light that was needed by all life, while not piercing the eyes with its blazing brilliance; sunset really wasn't all that different from twilight. With the latter only appearing slightly later, but remaining resplendent.

Chen Chang Sheng had only started cultivating after arriving at the Capital from Xi Ning Village; it could be seen that he had yet to step upon the mountain trail by the time the Sun had already sunk to the West, yet, in the end, he had surpassed many of those that started out before him; to the point of matching those like Gou Han Shi, being one of the first to reach the peak.

“So he's first upon the First Banner this year?”

“Is it really that person named Chen Chang Sheng?”

“Could there be a mistake somewhere?”

The crowd outside of Li Palace watched the youth from Orthodox Academy that was walking over slowly on the divine avenue under the twilight; discussions abounded and their faces were full of bewilderment, for even more of them, they were too shocked for words.

At the Ivy League gathering, Chen Chang Sheng had become famous in the Capital due to his betrothal to Xu You Rong, making him a target of animosity and ridicule for the citizenry, to the

point where an adage was specially targeted to him – a toad wishes to dine on the Phoenix, dreams of absurdity.

On the day the Proclamation of Azure Clouds was updated, His Eminence had made a declaration in place of Chen Chang Sheng, that he would take first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination, no one took it seriously, conversely, it led to even more mockery and derision, no one believed he would really be able to achieve it, and they all awaited Chen Chang Sheng's reaction on having achieved nothing by the end of the examination.

This year's examination was very lively, the populace was only concerned with how they could satisfyingly release their disdain towards the delusional Chen Chang Sheng that dreams of absurdity.

Yet, who could have guessed, delusion had actually become reality, beyond dreams, the absurd had actually happened, that youth from Orthodox Academy that couldn't cultivate just a few months ago had really managed to take first upon the First Banner.

That's correct, this year's first upon the First Banner wasn't Gou Han Shi, or anyone from the Divine State's Seven Laws, neither was it Tian Hai Sheng Xue, Zhe Xiu, Zhuang Huan Yu or a young scholar from Scholartree Manor.

It was Chen Chang Sheng.

No one could bring themselves to believe this result, but it was the truth. A lot of people, especially those who had derided Chen Chang Sheng relentlessly before the Grand Examination, felt that

their faces were a little hot, perhaps even aching.

Even if it was the truth, the populace still couldn't accept it, couldn't understand it. The silence within and without Li Palace was broken by the sound of discussion and information on specifics to the duel was rapidly disseminated.

At the next moment, both sides of the divine avenue and the area surrounding the palace, within and without, they all became quiet, until suddenly, an explosive clamour rang out.

Chen Chang Sheng had actually achieved Ethereal Opening during the examination's duelling? And it was during the battle against Gou Han Shi? How could this possibly be the level previously displayed by Chen Chang Sheng.

Being able to take first place today at the Grand Examination, already had far too many legendary overtones, for him to have actually completed his Ethereal Opening during the examination could only further add to this.

Achieving Ethereal Opening at the age of fifteen? It had to be known what this signified?

The importance of this event, was almost comparable to first upon the First Banner for the Grand Examination.

The sunset shone upon the divine avenue at an angle, lengthening Chen Chang Sheng's shadow to an enormous scale.

On both sides of the divine avenue, there were several academies that were directly under the administration of Li Palace, farther ahead, beyond the stone pillars, there were thousands upon thousands of citizenry, furthermore, under the shading of trees, there were the faint figures of many dignitaries.

No matter who they were, they all watched that youth who was on the divine avenue; they all had difficulty hiding the shock on their faces.

Su Mo Yu sat on a wheelchair that was pushed by a fellow student from Li Palace College; he was currently by the woods beside the avenue.

He gazed upon Chen Chang Sheng. Thinking back on the words he had said to him some days ago, his current mood was rather complicated.

Chen Chang Sheng turned his gaze towards him, dipping his head in acknowledgment. Under the stares of the masses, it was an inconvenient time for words, he used his gaze to query Su Mo Yu's injuries, Su Mo Yu conveyed that they weren't going to pose too much of a problem, he then solemnly performed a formal gesture of respect.

Chen Chang Sheng stilled his steps, calmly returning the gesture.

A lot of examinees that had completed the examination still remained and were also watching Chen Chang Sheng, but not everyone had the same decorum as Su Mo Yu; their expressions

were extremely unsightly.

Zhuang Huan Yu sat in the horse carriage for Heavenly Academy, he lifted a corner of the window blind and watched the youth's back, the youth that was slowly heading out of Li Palace under the focus of innumerable gazes. His pallid face revealed a bitter rejection of events, the inability to accept what had happened.

The four scholars of Scholartree Manor, with Zhong Hui as the lead, stood at a stele pavilion in the Northwestern corner of Li Palace, they stared at the distant Chen Chang Sheng, their faces revealing rage and disappointment.

That's right, no matter how angry or bitter they were whilst watching Chen Chang Sheng, it could only end in disappointment, because from today onwards, their names that had once gleamed upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, in front of Chen Chang Sheng, they would become dull, completely lacking in any splendour, not to mention, they have perhaps even lost the qualification to compare with Chen Chang Sheng.

Their names all occupied a high position upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, and in the future, they will probably remain upon it, but Chen Chang Sheng's name had never appeared on the proclamation, neither will it ever appear upon it.

On the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, Luo Luo had risen from ninth to second, Xu You Rong had wrested first place and Qiu Shan Jun had similarly done the same, directly causing the proclamation to suddenly update for the third time, shocking the entire continent.

What Chen Chang Sheng has achieved, was even more inconceivable.

He had never entered the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, and this year, he has no need to ever enter the proclamation, because he has already achieved Ethereal Opening, even if he was to enter a proclamation, it could only be the Proclamation of Golden Distinction, the same as the current Qiu Shan Jun and Gou Han Shi.

In other words, his cultivation had directly skipped over the stage for the Proclamation of Azure Clouds.

A normal person that had never cultivated. Upon starting to cultivate, having never entered the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, with their first appearance before the world, had directly entered the Proclamation of Golden Distinction; when has the world ever had such a person?

Those people within and without Li Palace were ceaselessly discussing this as it went through their stunned minds.

Some people could vaguely remember, that many years ago, Wang Zhi Ce seemed to have achieved something similar.

Chen Chang Sheng's group of three, walked out of Li Palace, the crowd surged forwards akin to the tide.

A powerful presence sprang from the air, keeping the people at bay.

Jin Yu Lu held onto the reins, expressionlessly watching the citizenry that were incessantly crying out Chen Chang Sheng's name. His attitude was very clear, whoever dared to draw near, would become a dead person.

Li Palace under the sunset, had become unusually rowdy due to Chen Chang Sheng; Jin Yu Lu's fearsome reputation was enough to subdue the crowd and cause them not to dare draw close, but it couldn't stop their stares or their clamour.

Thousands of shocked, curious and querying gazes, all congregated together, becoming even fiercer than the sunlight, to the point where Chen Chang Sheng even felt that his clothing had been set ablaze, his cheeks throbbing.

“Banner Lead Chen, Banner Lead Chen.”

“I humbly request Banner Lead Chen to rest for but a moment at my teahouse.”

“Banner Lead Chen, such a joyous time calls for wine, my Master presents this Huangzhou Zui.”

“Young master Tang, you haven't visited my daughter for quite some time, on such a fine night, how could you possibly waste it...”

Countless voices drifted over from the crowd, continuously entering the ears of Chen Chang Sheng's group, as the scene became increasingly lively, some people couldn't care for Jin Yu Lu's ice cold glare any longer and edged in closer, some of the slightly more daring ladies, then extended their arms to incessantly touch upon Tang Thirty-Six: a scene of chaos.

Chen Chang Sheng had obtained first upon the First Banner, it was obviously not something that could be considered jubilant and countless citizens of the Capital had lost money due to him, but their moods had already been replaced by the shock of witnessing such a miracle.

Not to mention, the conflict against the demon race had lasted for a thousand years, the human world had always only acknowledged the strong, idolising geniuses, how could the populace gathered here for the Grand Examination possibly ignore this opportunity?

Luckily, at that moment, the Li Palace clergy and officials from the Ministry of Personnel that were tasked with maintaining order, had rushed to the scene, under the fearsome reputation of His Grace, Zhou Tong, the masses finally quietened down.

Chen Chang Sheng walked to the horse carriage and sincerely performed a gesture of respect alongside Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po towards Jin Yu Lu.

Jin Yu Lu lightly stroked his thin beard, silently, with a small smile, being extremely pleased.

The reins were gently flicked and the carriage slowly moved, the surrounding crowd automatically parted to create a path; just as how it had been when they surged forwards earlier, it was a tide, a representation of some kind of attitude.

Of course, the ardent clamouring from the crowd remained incessant.

At the back of the carriage, Chen Chang Sheng lifted the window drape, turning back to gaze at the path they had taken, all he could see was that under the evening glow, at the end of the divine avenue and above the long staircase, the Hall of Clear Virtue looked as if it was blazing.

On the upper floor's balustrade, a person's figure could vaguely be seen, he guessed that it was probably Luo Luo and started to smile; then, he saw, beside an old tree by the divine avenue, the Archbishop standing, his body slightly crooked and his age apparent. No one drew near, making him appear very lonely, thus, the lips that had only just raised, relaxed, his smile slowly retracted.

The carriage's wheels rolled across the green slabs while the clamour surrounding them continued without abating, it was as if the populace of the Capital were preparing to escort them all the way back to Orthodox Academy; those within the carriage naturally didn't dare to lift the drape again.

"That 'daughter' of someone, what's that about?" Chen Chang Sheng looked at Tang Thirty-Six and asked.

Tang Thirty-Six felt rather annoyed and sternly replied: “Who knows.”

Seeing his reaction, Chen Chang Sheng obviously wouldn't continue questioning; thinking back on the situation outside of Li Palace, he sighed and said: “Only today have I come to understand why Zhou Du Fu's younger brother would be stared to death by people... with the stares of so many people gathered at one point, it actually seemed even scarier than Gou Han Shi's Secret Sword of the Golden Crow.”

Tang Thirty-Six laughed at him and said: “You should count yourself lucky, in comparison to previous years, upon leaving the palace, you would have had to fear getting abducted by the dignitaries in the Capital and we would have also had our share of that fortune.”

Chen Chang Sheng didn't understand, asking: “What's that about?”

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “First upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination is obviously a prime choice for a son-in-law, how could those personages possibly miss such an opportunity? How could those prurient girls possibly let go of you?”

Chen Chang Sheng finally understood what he meant, thinking back on those hands, that were quietly extended towards Tang Thirty-Six during the surge of people, those fine and slender hands that were full of adulation and longing, he laughed and said: “If they were to abduct someone, then it would be you.”

Tang Thirty-Six retorted in an annoyed voice: “I really dislike talking to you.”

Chen Chang Sheng asked: “You spoke of ‘previous years’, why is this year different?”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at his eyes and said, in a stern tone of voice: “Do you really not understand or are you pretending not to understand? You are currently betrothed to Xu You Rong, who would dare to snatch you from her hands?”

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Xu Shi Ji returned to the Divine General of the Eastern Decree’s Estate, his face still remained the same as it had for all this time, as if it had been frozen by the early Spring’s chill winds, making it impossible for others to tell what he was currently feeling.

After being engrossed for a moment by a warm wind in the drawing room, his body and mood alike, slightly relaxed. Yet, upon thinking of the words from the officials and bishops back at the Li Palace side hall, his expression became even colder.

The Grand Examination had already acquired its banner lists, but the official release wasn’t till tomorrow, therefore, court officials and personages from the Orthodoxy didn’t have to make an appearance and had waited in a side hall as they conversed and had tea.

Upon the end to the duelling, he had also gone there for a while, but he could have never expected that he would hear no less than ten sounds of congratulations.

Congratulations, congratulations... congratulations for what? It was obviously for Chen Chang Sheng obtaining first upon the First Banner; for the Divine General's Estate to have obtained such a fine son-in-law, what reason could he have for being unhappy?

Xu Shi Ji was obviously not happy, those words of congratulation were obviously mocking him, therefore, how could his expression possibly be good.

He sat within the chair and closed his eyes, remaining quiet for a long period of time.

Night came and the candle flames within the room lightly swayed, suddenly, a light drizzle fell within the courtyard. Drizzles of early Spring were often even colder than Winter snow, yet, his expression became warmer.

Because this spell of rain made him remember the ones that happened within the Tower of Purging Dust. He turned his gaze towards his wife and said: "On the day the banners are released, prepare a banquet. It doesn't have to be overly extravagant, familial is fine."

Madam Xu could faintly deduce his intent, she felt rather stunned and speechless.

A familial banquet, was obviously a family dinner.

Chapter 181 – The Academy Gate Repaired

Chen Chang Sheng had obtained first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination, causing the Divine General's estate to prepare a family dinner, yet he had also caused many dinners at many homes to disappear. Even those that remained, were diminished in scope, because a lot of people had lost money.

According to estimates after the incident, for wagers related to the Grand Examination, the four major gambling venues had opened over 300 of them, within these, the top 100 in terms of value, where mainly related to rankings for the examination; due to Chen Chang Sheng's appearance and also due to the unexpected situation of Tian Hai Sheng Xue's withdrawal, a dark horse was born, and very few people won anything on this year's wagers.

Logically, with the bettors losing, the house should be winning, yet this year, the four major venues didn't manage to garner any great sums from the Grand Examination, this was because just a few nights before the examination started, there were multiple big bets made on Orthodox Academy and Chen Chang Sheng.

The first sum of money was from those few fellows of Orthodox Academy themselves; due to Chen Chang Sheng's attitude of the Grand Examination being the last endeavour of his life, he placed everything he owned in a wager on himself.

Xuan Yuan Po didn't have much money, yet he had also passed on the 17 taels of silver he owned. The real bulk of the sum came from Tang Thirty-Six and Luo Luo; though they had only taken out the money they had lying around, due to the immense wealth of their respective families, the sum was already hefty, not to mention the pay-out rate at that time was extremely high.

The second sum of money placed on Chen Chang Sheng came from the Education Board, the one who came forward was Minister Xin, the person he was representing was that ancient yet imposing Archbishop. The sum was extraordinarily large, and rumour had it, apart from His Eminence, The Archbishop, a lot of other clergy from the Education Board also wagered large sums in a display of their loyalty.

The third sum was even larger, to the point where it could be called rather terrifying; that sum came from Wen Shui.

Due to those three sums of money that had been wagered on the successful dark horse, the four major gambling venues suffered extremely heavy losses, especially on the third sum, directly causing the somewhat weaker of the four venues, Tian Xiang (Heaven's Scent) Venue, to feel extremely pressured.

To be able to host such a scale of gambling, the four venues obviously had tremendously powerful backgrounds. Even though the most important thing in the gambling business could be said to be trust, if it really was to threaten their very existence, it wouldn't be surprising for a bit of fraud to happen, or at the very least, delays.

Alas, this time, they did not dare to play any tricks, lacking even the courage to appeal for someone to help them plead, this was because no matter how much of a powerful background they had, they still wouldn't dare to offend Orthodox Academy that had the backing of Her Highness, Luo Luo. They wouldn't dare to offend the Education Board that was strong enough to stand against His

Holiness, The Pope. They especially wouldn't dare to offend the third sum's master.

That sum of money had come from Wen Shui, which naturally meant it came from the Tang clan.

Wen Shui only had one Tang clan, the entire continent only had one Tang clan and in the world itself, only that Tang clan would have so much money that they would freely take out a large sum to place a wager on Chen Chang Sheng just to please their own young master...

Anything taken to an extreme will become extremely horrifying, with a clan that has far too much money, such as the Tang clan from Wen Shui, it was no longer your regular sort of horror, but an inordinate sort of horror.

Yet, the Elderly Master of the Tang clan could never have guessed, what had simply been for the purpose of inflating the prestige of his dear grandson in the Capital, that had also caused citizens of the Capital to roll their eyes, had actually resulted in a fairly large return, it could even be said that the winners of this year's Grand Examination, apart from being Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy, was the Tang clan.

In just a few days' time, it would be the Spring Festival, the gifts given to the Education Board for this occasion would presumably be remarkably hefty and those clergy's dinners at their homes would undoubtedly have a sizeable increase to the amount of dishes available.

Within Orthodox Academy, the wealthy would become even

wealthier and the only pauper, Xuan Yuan Po, would probably no longer have to worry about not having any money; while Tian Xiang Venue, that was famous upon the continent, after its subsequent liquidation, will be sold to a southern merchant that trades in the jewellery business.

All of these things were effects brought about by the Grand Examination.

Of course, these effects were only on the outside, the real effects were hidden beneath the water's surface, awaiting the time to display its might; perhaps at the time the Banners are formally released for the examination, it would reveal a part of that might.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know of these things, didn't know that his wealth had already increased several-fold and that it was enough to allow him to live in the Capital even more comfortably for over a decade, though of course, he would first have to live on for another decade or more.

Neither did Tang Thirty-Six know of these things, or perhaps it could be said, he did not care for these things, the amount of money he had wagered, in the eyes of others, was already tremendously large, but in truth, it was only a few months of his allowance, this level of gambling, was not something he would bother remembering; as for what those at Wen Shui had done, he was even less clear on the events.

The horse carriage returned to the academy.

Countless people from the populace had also accompanied them to the depths of the Hundred Blossom Lane, the scene was highly lively, with cries of “congratulations to Banner Lead Chen” and the like constantly being heard, there was also a lot of surprised chatter.

The surprised chatter was not targeted at Chen Chang Sheng, but were targeted towards the current entrance of Orthodox Academy.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others got off the carriage, seeing the front entrance, they were slightly startled, wondering to themselves as to what was going on.

Last year, on that morning where an Autumn shower was falling, a purebred warhorse from the Tian Hai clan had collapsed in a puddle, on the verge of death, constantly spurting blood foam; the academy’s entrance had been smashed into an unsightly mess, akin to some ruins.

From that day onwards, the academy’s entrance had been left in that state, without being repaired, even the most basic cleaning had not been performed, making it all the more derelict, if it wasn’t for Jin Yu Lu, lying on a bamboo chair with a pot of tea on a daily basis, no one would have been able to tell that there actually used to be a gate there.

This was a contest between Orthodox Academy, which is favoured upon by His Eminence, The Archbishop, and the Orthodoxy’s new faction that was led by His Holiness, The Pope. It was also a contest between the tradition faction that is loyal to the Imperial Chen clan, and the Tian Hai clan.

This type of contest was very high levelled, yet, in the end, on the ground level, it was a quarrel that carried with it a childish air.

It was probably due to the three youths from Orthodox Academy being too young and likely also because they didn't think of the situation in too complex a fashion; they only knew that the entrance had been damaged by someone from the Tian Hai clan and thus, they were the ones who should repair it.

The Tian Hai clan would obviously not repair it, that would represent defeat and surrender. With the academy also not bothering, this caused the ruined entrance to stick out before the eyes of the Capital's citizenry, until the ruined entrance finally became a famous new sight for the Capital – what was being contested here was a grudge, so obviously no one would be the first to stand down.

Yet currently, surrounding the originally shattered entrance, there were over 10 craftsmen wearing government uniforms, there were also a large amount of wooden beams and jade material that looked evidently extraordinary, that had all been placed upon the empty ground by the side of the entrance. From the look of things, it actually seemed as if someone was preparing to repair the entrance, no wonder then, as to why the populace were vigorously discussing things, heavily surprised.

The old manager that was in charge of works to repair the entrance did not directly address Chen Chang Sheng's group, but instead, followed the instructions he was given and loudly declared to the crowd that had gathered to watch as to what he and his group intended to do.

The Tian Hai clan wanted to repair Orthodox Academy's front gate?

And it was a white jade gate?

Could it be that the Tian Hai clan really was conceding defeat? How could this possibly be?

Under the accompanying gazes of countless citizenry, Chen Chang Sheng's group entered the academy, Jin Yu Lu continued to do what he had always done, he lit a fire at the gatehouse and began to make tea, he then carried the bamboo recliner and placed it before the academy entrance, after telling the nervous craftsmen that were currently surveying the work that had to be done that they should not disturb him, he began to enjoy the night view.

Under the banyan tree by the lake side, the lawn had only been dyed with patches of green by early Spring, Chen Chang Sheng's group headed towards the direction of the library.

Xuan Yuan Po asked what should be eaten for dinner and whether if cured meat, though tasty, would be too salty? Tang Thirty-Six replied with a question of what kind of occasion was it, how could they bother caring and that over the past few days his tongue was close to being insipid to the point where a "fowl" was on the verge of emerging from it.

The voices and the fluttering of a flock of wild birds from the woods, drifted towards the direction of the Hundred Herb Garden.

The lights in the library were lit, making it slightly yellowish,

very cosy. The academy was the same as it ever was, slightly drab, very peaceful; even if the Grand Examination had only just ended and they had experienced and completed many things, neither the academy or the three youths underwent any sort of change.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at Tang Thirty-Six and said his first words upon returning to the academy: “Where did Zhe Xiu go to? Did you recover the Sword of Wen Shui?”

“If you didn’t ask, I would have almost forgot, how did you and Gou Han Shi fight? How did you make my sword fly off to such a distant place? Will you stop staring at my waist? It clearly isn’t there... Minister Xin said it had landed within a restriction, he’ll return it here after a few days.”

Speaking up to that point, Tang Thirty-Six frowned and said: “Zhe Xiu got up once his injuries became slightly better, he ignored the advice from me and Her Highness and directly left the Education Palace, I don’t know where he went, but... with his personality, he will definitely look for you, it’s only a question of when.”

He then looked at Chen Chang Sheng and asked: “Just how did you fight against Gou Han Shi? Have you really completed your Ethereal Opening? Even if you have, you couldn’t have possibly been able to win, have you really completed your Ethereal Opening?”

In a single speech, he had asked about the Ethereal Opening twice.

Tang Thirty-Six stared at Chen Chang Sheng, his eyes glimmering to the point of resembling stars; the topic of Ethereal Opening made him far more shocked and envious of Chen Chang Sheng than his taking of first place in the Grand Examination.

Not just him, for all the young geniuses that were ranked at the top upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, what they wanted to achieve the most, was to surpass that hurdle as early and as safely as possible.

Chen Chang Sheng wanted to say he hadn't even figured out as to what had happened, but suddenly, he heard a loud noise from the direction of the entrance, outside of the library, he involuntarily felt a little startled.

Xuan Yuan Po pushed open the doors and left, to see what was happening, after a while, he returned to the library. Rubbing his head, he said, in a slightly confused tone: "They've started to repair the gate."

"That quickly?" Tang Thirty-Six raised his brow and said: "What does that fellow from the Tian Hai clan want to do?"

With such an interruption, Chen Chang Sheng had forgotten what he wanted to say; remembering Tian Hai Sheng Xue's voluntary forfeiture when faced against Luo Luo in the Education Palace, he felt that there had to be some reason he did not know of for the event.

Outside of the window, it suddenly began to rain.

The trickle of chill rain in the early Spring fell upon the window's upper frame, it lacked any sound, only carrying with it moisture.

Thinking of the spells of rain that fell within the Tower of Purging Dust today, Chen Chang Sheng became even quieter.

Those spells of Autumn rain were the handiwork of His Holiness.

Yet, why had His Holiness saved him? Ignoring the fact that he was only an unimportant character, even if he wasn't, His Holiness had personally destroyed Orthodox Academy many years ago, why would His Holiness now intervene on behalf of the academy?

His mood became rather complicated, because he found that events were becoming more complicated.

On the night the examination ended and the same night they returned to the academy, the dinner cooked by Xuan Yuan Po was unavoidably a little simple, after consuming three slices of cured meat and having three bowls of rice steeped in tea, Chen Chang Sheng felt full, he then felt that he could no longer restrain the feeling of fatigue from taking over his body and that it was difficult to continue sitting around.

"Let's rest a little earlier," he said as he stood up.

Tang Thirty-Six was very displeased with tonight's dinner, as he was eating, he had continuously grumbled, seeing Chen Chang Sheng preparing to leave, he became even more displeased and said: "Just like that?"

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly confused and asked: "What else should there be?"

"Please, you've only just taken first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination and smacked the faces of those who had looked down upon you, can you not appear so calm?"

Tang Thirty-Six yelled: "Didn't we already discuss this before, tonight we eat stuff that isn't healthy at all and then get drunk? If we need dancers, then just a single call from me will get you a troupe of over a dozen."

Chen Chang Sheng felt a little troubled. He understood that they really should do a few things to celebrate at a moment like this and that it would be considered normal, but the three slices of cured meat he had just eaten were already a big compromise for himself, getting drunk was something he really couldn't bring himself to accept.

He looked outside the window, only seeing the cold snow slowly thaw, the stars slowly twinkle and that the time was now late, he turned to face Tang Thirty-Six and said: "The day after tomorrow, no, it should be tomorrow, I'll... drink a few with you?"

That was the day the Banners are official released for the Grand

Examination.

Chapter 182 – In A Single Night; Before Thousands Of People

“The day after tomorrow? Because that’s when the Banner is released? I don’t consider it to be all that important, who can possibly take away your first upon the First Banner at this point?” said Tang Thirty-Six mockingly as he looked at him.

He then became quiet due to five words that were in his previous speech, he looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said: “That’s right, you’ve already become first upon the First Banner... I have to admit, at the start, I really couldn’t look upon you favourably, even when you entered the tower with Gou Han Shi at the end, I still didn’t think you would actually be able to take first place, yet, who could have expected, in the end you really did obtain it.”

He extended his right hand, resting it upon Chen Chang Sheng’s shoulder, he lightly squeezed, then said: “Incredible.” Within the library, it was silent, Xuan Yuan Po didn’t say anything, but his gaze that was fixated on Chen Chang Sheng, expressed the same sentiment.

“Thank you for all that you’ve done,” said Chen Chang Sheng sincerely as he looked at Tang Thirty-Six, he then turned his head to look at Xuan Yuan Po and said: “Everyone, thank you.”

This “everyone” included Xuan Yuan Po, encompassed Jin Yu Lu and naturally, also included Luo Luo. Without all of them, no matter how hard he was to strive, how would he have been able to create this miracle?

Leaving the library and returning to the small dorm building – Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po were undoubtedly, currently drinking rice wine; Chen Chang Sheng lay within the wooden tub, enjoying the hot water's sweltering heat as he mused about their revelry.

Since Luo Luo and her people left the Hundred Herb Garden, the newly installed door hadn't been opened for a long period of time, thus he had moved the tub back over.

Whether be it early Spring or under the falling snow of cold Winter, bathing under the open sky is a very pleasant experience, it was also a habit he had acquired from bathing in the hot springs outside of the old temple at Xi Ning Village.

His hands rested on the tub's edge, his gaze traversed across the dorm's roof and fell upon the night sky, seeing the endless sea of stars, he perceived the small red star that was far away, feeling very tranquil and happy.

The heavens above have countless stars, knowing that there is a star which completely, serenely and silently belonged to himself with full certainty; being the sole thing between him and itself; this made him feel very pleasant.

Within the abyss of despair, he had quietly advanced without any companions, without a crutch, without seeing any sunlight at all and without stopping. He had finally left the fog and could see hope; this made him feel even better.

Under the starlight, Chen Chang Sheng's still tender looking face revealed a small, sincere smile.

Likewise, under the starlight, at a location in the direction of the academy's wall, seen at the upper tip of the woodlands, while being situated deep within the Imperial Palace, there was a lonely, distant and expansive pavilion, as if it were removed from everything in the world: this was the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

Gazing at the far away Pavilion of Ascending Mist, the smile on Chang Sheng's face gradually withdrew, returning to a peaceful state, he silently said to himself, "I will see you soon, I hope it can be a pleasant meeting."

By this time, those displays of Autumn in the Tower of Purging Dust and the meaning that was hidden behind them; the confrontation between the new and tradition factions of the Orthodoxy and its relation to the academy; the thoughts of that elderly Archbishop; all of these things, for him, had become unimportant, he no longer mused over these things and even completely stopped thinking about them.

Matters outside of life and death are all naught but normal, or perhaps, small affairs.

The next morning, Chen Chang Sheng once again woke at the fifth hour, in accordance to his set lifestyle, after getting out of bed, he ignored Tang Thirty-Six, who was still hungover, and his cries of having a headache, he also ignored Xuan Yuan Po's

thunderous snoring, forcing both of them out of bed and dragging them to the dining-table. From a pot, he dished out some millet congee and salted vegetables, placing it into bowls that were placed in front of them.

After their night of happy drinking, Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po were currently extremely tired, yet after smelling the fragrant salted vegetables and seeing the faintly golden millet congee, their appetites suddenly returned, they buried their heads in and slurped it down.

After a short while, Jin Yu Lu also came in.

Chen Chang Sheng and the others felt a little startled, it had to be known, that in the past few months, Secretary-General Jin had always eaten aromatically and drunken pungently in his own room and would very rarely partake in the academy's three meals.

“Don't be mistaken, I'm still not interested in food that doesn't contain any meat,” said Jin Yu Lu as he laughed lightly. Upon hearing his words, Xuan Yuan Po vigorously nodded his head; as a fellow member of the yao race, he concurred with what Secretary-General Jin had just said, it was just, in front of Chen Chang Sheng, he dared to fume, but didn't dare to speak.

Chen Chang Sheng got up and filled a bowl of millet congee, passing it to Jin Yu Lu's hand, then asked: “What's happened?”

Jin Yu Lu passed over a stack of items that were in his hand, he then raised the bowl of millet congee and drank it all in a single

motion, he then said: “Since early this morning, it hasn’t abated at all, go and see for yourself as to how it should be handled.”

Finishing those words, he turned around and headed for the academy gate.

Chen Chang Sheng received the stack of items, casually going through them, upon seeing the words and the names that were on them, his expression became slightly tense, this was followed with a lot of doubt and confusion.

That thick stack was comprised entirely of name cards and gift records – there was a gift record from Prince Chen Liu; there were gifts from several red-clad clergy of the Education Board; Minister Xin had even privately sent a hefty gift.

There were name cards from several high ranking officials of the government, with one of them actually being from Xue Xing Chuan; once Chen Chang Sheng had reached the bottom, he even saw gift records from Holy Churches other than the Education Board.

What was this about? Chen Chang Sheng was really puzzled, upon going through the stack of name cards and gift records, Tang Thirty-Six also felt very perplexed.

The three of them travelled to the academy entrance, wanting to seek the advice of Jin Yu Lu, but all they saw was that the entrance area was very noisy. Countless craftsmen were endlessly working away, in just a single night, an academy gate constructed from white jade material had already begun to emerge in its initial form, this caused them to involuntarily feel speechless.

Chen Chang Sheng placing first upon the First Banner was nowhere near enough to bring about such changes, in a single night, the Capital's attitude towards Orthodox Academy had completely changed; there was definitely a problem here.

Being unable to understand it, it was better to not ponder over it. Chen Chang Sheng and the others did not leave the academy, but did what they usually did, sitting in the library, reading and cultivating, discussing and reviewing details of the Grand Examination.

– especially details on the final battle against Gou Han Shi.

How did he achieve Ethereal Opening? Chen Chang Sheng didn't know, but he still wanted to confer his experience to Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po, hoping to provide some help for their future breakthrough into the realm of Ethereal Opening.

Apart from this, their activities for today were no different from usual, apart from Chen Chang Sheng occasionally glancing towards the academy entrance or the quiet academy wall that was in the direction of the academy's pond (lake), thinking that Zhe Xiu would make an appearance at the next moment, yet, in the end, it didn't happen.

A day passed by and then a night, arriving at the time where the Banners of the Grand Examination are officially released.

The Banners aren't released at Li Palace, but instead, at the plaza before the Hall of Grand Clarity. The azure skies above were void

of clouds for countless miles, sunlight constantly streamed down, driving away the chill of early Spring. With the temperature becoming as heated as the atmosphere of the plaza.

Peddlers on the outer perimeter that were selling small benches, melon seeds and tea were naturally the busiest people there, while the military personnel and constables that were tasked with maintaining order, remained the hardest working people there. Only those that would occasionally converse with soldiers they were acquainted with, were the most fortunate people; being able to join in the revelry without worrying about anything was obviously the most fortunate thing.

It was a sea of people before the Hall of Grand Clarity, thousands upon thousands of citizens from the Capital, alongside travellers who had rushed over from the outer regions, formed a teeming dark mass, their faces filled with elated expressions.

A protocol officer, wearing a vermillion coloured government uniform, stood atop some steps that were located at the Northern end of the plaza, his hands held a silken document, with him loudly announcing the list of names for this year's Three Grades.

In front of him and behind, there were a total of 16 black-garbed strongmen, loud whips in hand, awaiting their role.

Every time the protocol officer announced a name, the 16 strongmen would uniformly crack the leather whips, creating a sharp sound of air being broken, filling the entire plaza and suppressing sounds of the crowd's discussion. Following this moment of silence, court musicians that were situated at the rear of the hallway, atop the steps, would perform a musical piece as a

celebration.

A very simplistic and perhaps even a little dull process, but because of the Grand Examination's unique status and due to the plaza's atmosphere, it made it all the more festive.

Upon announcing the name of a single person, came the sound of whips, after the sound of whips it was music; in the end, what resonated within the plaza, was still the thunderous cheering.

With the announcement of a single name by the protocol officer, the sound of cheering would fill the skies, those examinees that were waiting by the side of the hall, after tidying their clothing, would arrive in front of the hall decorously, receiving the masses' felicitations and the Zhou Empire's commendation.

The Grand Examination selected a total of 43 people. The examinees arrived in front of the hall in sequence, their expressions differing. Most examinees were uncontrollably jubilant; some were haughty, their faces showing that they believed their placement to be a matter of course; some examinees were calm, while some were anxious and uneasy; some examinees appeared somewhat forlorn, being very displeased with their ranking.

Though Su Mo Yu had been eliminated from the duelling very early on by Zhe Xiu, his results in the Academic Exam were very good, and in the end, he barely made it into the Grand Examinations Three Grades, fortuitously placing last on the Third Grading, for this, he felt rather rueful, but he didn't display anything, calmly accepting everything.

For examinees that were similar to him, in being far-famed, the majority of them entered the Three Grades, with very few mishaps occurring, apart from Zhe Xiu, who had no results to speak of in the academic phase and therefore didn't make it into the Three Grades.

With the vermillion-garbed officer continuously announcing names, everyone subsequently heard the names of three young scholars from Scholartree Manor, three names from Star Seizer Academy, two from Holy Maiden Peak, one from Heavenly Academy and two from Temple Seminary; the three young experts from Li Shan Sword Sect were obviously also included.

The masses counted as they listened, discovering that this year was still the same as the previous years, with the Southerners having the lead; the sounds of cheering gradually became weak and listless, but were also all the more expectant of the First Banner's announcement.

Unknown as to if it was this reason, or if it was because Tang Thirty-Six was far too well-liked by the girls of the Capital, upon the protocol officer's announcement of his name, the cheering that happened in front of the Hall of Grand Clarity, actually became incredibly resounding.

It had finally reached the time for announcement of the Grand Examination's First Banner, though the seating arrangements had already been decided upon early on, the masses were still attentive and expectant, seeming to be especially euphoric; the sounds of discussion gradually intensified.

Third place on the First Banner for this year's Grand Examination went to Scholartree Manor's Zhong Hui.

Zhong Hui is a renowned young genius, ranked ninth upon the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, but rationally speaking, entering the First Banner should have been a very difficult task for him. However, on this occasion, with Luo Luo's results for the Grand Examination not being included in the rankings; Tian Hai Sheng Xue's early withdrawal from the competition; Liang Ban Hu's loss to his own junior brother, Qi Jian; Qi Jian and Guan Fei Bai's subsequent losses to Zhe Xiu; and Zhuang Huan Yu's unexpected loss: when totalling his results with that of the academic phase, Zhong Hui had actually entered the First Banner in an extremely lucky manner.

Zhong Hui was very clear on the fact that the only reason as to why he had entered the First Banner, was due to luck. His face revealed no joy, but when receiving the golden sceptre that represented third place, he didn't dare to reveal a shred of negligence, because the person in charge of awards to those upon the First Banner, was no longer the protocol officer, but a real dignitary: His Excellency, The Zhou Dynasty's Prime Minister, Yu Wenjing.

Following this, Gou Han Shi walked up to the front of the hall from the side. He, who had yet to reach the age of twenty, clothed in simple garments, his expression calm and unfettered, allowed the Prime Minister to help him place the jade belt upon his waist. He politely gave his gratitude, then retreated to one side, only upon the masses unrestrained clapping and cheering, did he reveal a small smile.

After this, it became eerily quiet in front of the Hall of Grand Clarity. The breathing of the whip wielding strongmen and even the brushing of fabric from the populace's clothing seemed to be

ear-piercingly loud.

A lone youth headed towards the front of the hall, following along the stone steps.

The sights of many, rested upon him.

Chapter 183 – Only A Lowered Head Can Bear That Crown

Under countless gazes, that youth silently advanced. From his demeanour, he seemed a little stiff, but was controlling it fairly well, without appearing overly nervous. His steps were steady and his academy uniform gently fluttered in the wind, it wasn't all that dazzling to the eyes, but was very neat, the same feeling he himself gave others.

“So that's Chen Chang Sheng?”

Within the crowd that were gathered in the plaza before the Hall of Grand Clarity, there erupted a multitude of sounds from discussion and questioning.

Chen Chang Sheng had long been famous in the Capital, a lot of people had heard of his name, knew of his background and knew of that betrothal, but today, for many, it was their first time seeing him.

It was only now, that many of the populace could form a real impression of him. They discovered that he wasn't the same as Tang Thirty-Six in being a refined and elegant nobleman, neither was he a pretty boy, but instead, he was someone that gave others the feeling that he was approachable.

Chen Chang Sheng walked up the stone steps, arriving before the hall, he turned around to look at the sea of people on the plaza.

Beside him, there was an ebony table, upon the table, there was a garland of thistles. Sunlight spilled in from the edge of the clouds above, falling upon the garland and scattering into faint rays of light.

The garland of thistles didn't have any gold or jade, looking rather plain, but it represented the hardships and glory that are on the path of cultivation, being extremely significant within the Orthodoxy's traditions, while also being a symbol of first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination.

It slowly became quiet in front of the Hall of Grand Clarity; everyone had been waiting for this moment.

Those examinees, court officials and bishops standing in front of the hall, looked at the image of Chen Chang Sheng's back as he stood before them, their moods were various; some were gratified; some were calm; some were envious; some were indifferent. However, no matter what they felt, at this moment and time, they could only wait upon Chen Chang Sheng receiving this heavy accolade.

What was somewhat surprising, was that His Excellency, The Prime Minister, who was in charge of awards for the three that were ranked upon the Grand Examination's First Banner, had retreated to the crowd at some point and was no longer situated before the hall, whom therefore, was going to do the awarding?

It was at that moment, the sunlight from the heavens above that

fell upon the garland of thistles suddenly dispersed, becoming countless strands before congregating into a ball of light in front of the hall; it was a holy and pristine, white ball of light.

Gasps of exclamation resonated before the Hall of Grand Clarity.

The divine radiance receded and a tall figure slowly emerged from within.

The figure was an elderly person wearing Sacred Robes, their head bore the Holy Crown and their hand held a staff of ordinance.

Divine music played out in unison, a hallowed and dignified presence enveloped the entire area.

Sounds of shock continuously arose, then rapidly returned to silence.

Limitless people prostrated themselves in greeting and reverence towards the elderly person, with the sea of people being akin to a wave; all heads lowered in deference.

Venerations to His Holiness, The Pope.

His Holiness, who had rarely appeared before the world for the past few years, had actually made a personal appearance, this was something no one could have anticipated, causing them to feel dumbstruck, what was this for?

Isn't Chen Chang Sheng a student of Orthodox Academy? Wasn't Orthodox Academy personally crushed by His Holiness many years ago? Wasn't the Orthodoxy currently in a tense situation, with the new and tradition factions confronting and challenging each other?

Apart from His Holiness, The Pope, another elderly person had also appeared before the Hall of Grand Clarity – His Eminence, Archbishop Mei Li Sha, had a peaceful expression on his face as he received the staff of ordinance from His Holiness, he then retreated to one side.

His Holiness used his hands to lift the garland of thistles from the table and then walked to the front of Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng was currently dumbfounded, not knowing what he should do, he subconsciously looked towards the Archbishop that was by the side, His Eminence smiled and nodded his head.

His Holiness looked at Chen Chang Sheng and smiled as he said: "If you don't lower your head, who will be able to help you wear the laurel wreath?"

Those words seemed to explain what was currently happening, but also seemed to have some sort of deeper meaning. However, how could Chen Chang Sheng possibly have the time to currently think of such matters, he quickly bent his knee slightly, lowering his head.

His Holiness placed the garland of thistles upon Chen Chang Sheng's head and carefully adjusted its positioning before finally being satisfied, His Holiness then said: "I have always considered these twigs to be rather unappealing; I don't know how those in the past felt, but placing it upon your head, it feels very invigorating, not bad."

Chen Chang Sheng was currently still in a state of stock and couldn't understand the hidden meaning of His Holiness' words, but at the very least, he could tell that His Holiness was praising him.

Not bad? How many young people could be evaluated as "not bad" by His Holiness? He only knew that Mo Yu and Prince Chen Liu had previously received this kind of evaluation, now, it was his turn.

"Rise," said His Holiness.

Chen Chang Sheng stood straight as instructed, he involuntarily raised his hand and touched the garland of thistles on the top of his head, relying upon the hard and thorny sensation to verify the authenticity of everything before finally calming down slightly.

Seeing his actions, His Holiness started laughing.

It was only then, that Chen Chang Sheng could finally see His Holiness' appearance clearly.

The Pope was an elderly person, with an aged face.

That face was very ordinary, with its most discerning feature being that its eyes were very deeply set, as if they were a deep abyss, yet, it wasn't terrifying, because it contained a cerulean sea and azure sky within, alongside sunlight.

The sea within The Pope's eyes were as calm and serene as mirrors under the brilliance of the sun, boundlessly blue, unknown as to how profoundly deep they might be, or how vast, if the sunlight was to withdraw and hurricanes were to suddenly appear, it would naturally become turbulent and perilous, with unending thunder and lightning, but currently, there was only sunlight, without any storms, therefore there was only benevolence, absolution and placidity.

This was the first time Chen Chang Sheng had seen such a gaze, in but a moment, it felt as if his body had become warm and cosy, wanting to step into that warm sea water; perhaps freely swimming within, or perhaps resting.

After a long period of time, he finally came to his senses.

After regaining his senses, through the sensation of the garland on his finger, he came to realise that only a moment had actually passed, he had yet to even retract his hand.

Such a dignified, hallowed, and immense realm of consciousness, really did make others feel nothing but praise and reverence.

Chen Chang Sheng had only truly regained his senses at that moment, comprehending that the elderly person standing in front of him was the most transcendent existence within the human world, someone that had already entered the realm of divinity, a true Saint.

He didn't know how to react, before suddenly remembering the spells of Autumn rain in the Tower of Purging Dust. Though he didn't know why His Holiness had helped him, he had still accepted the aid in the end.

“Thank you,” said Chen Chang Sheng, as he earnestly did a formal gesture towards His Holiness.

His Holiness looked at him with an affectionate gaze, extending his hand to lightly stroke Chen Chang Sheng's head, saying: “Poor child... good child... come see me after a few days.”

After saying those words, he indicated that Chen Chang Sheng should turn around.

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly stupefied, following the instructions and turning around, facing the thousands upon thousands of people before the Hall of Grand Clarity.

The Pope grasped onto his right hand and slowly raised it towards the heavens.

The plaza suddenly became silent, then a thunderous roar of cheering erupted, as if it wished to push through the skies.

His Holiness had left; His Eminence had also left.

The court officials and red-garbed bishops in front of the hall all came up to Chen Chang Sheng, looking at him with affectionate expressions as they congratulated and advised him, with someone saying, if Orthodox Academy was to have any problems, he could freely seek them for help, as if they really were one of his elders; even His Excellency, Prime Minister Yu Wenjing, came up and spoke some words to him.

Yesterday, the academy had received a lot of name cards and gift records, this was because these personages had acquired some details to the Grand Examination, details such as those few spells of Autumn rain – they couldn't see the current situation clearly, but needed to prepare in advance – His Holiness had actually made a personal appearance today and displayed such a cordial attitude towards Chen Chang Sheng, how could they possibly not understand, at the very least, they had to outwardly appear friendly.

The other examinees obviously didn't receive the same treatment as Chen Chang Sheng, they all stared at Chen Chang Sheng, who was in the centre, surrounded by personages.

Some of the observers had envious expressions, while others were sympathetic. Tang Thirty-Six said to Guan Fei Bai: "If first upon the First Banner has to be like this, then I would rather not bother obtaining it."

“I would also not want to,” said Guan Fei Bai, before suddenly coming to his senses and saying: “Wait, are we really familiar or something? Not to mention, you think you have the ability to obtain first upon the First Banner?”

“The fight is already over, is it worth continuing to be at odds with each other? Don’t you think, at this time, we should be more sympathetic towards a woeful person like Chen Chang Sheng?”

Though Tang Thirty-Six said this, he didn’t have any intention of going forward and helping Chen Chang Sheng break free from this situation. Those were all true dignitaries, it would have been more fitting if his Grandfather was here instead to help, Tang Thirty-Six’s own status was far too removed from these personages.

Chen Chang Sheng was very unaccustomed to this type of situation, being especially unused to the scent of incense coming from these personages, but he controlled his state of mind very well and nothing untoward could be said about his manners.

It was at that time, the area in front of the hall suddenly became quiet, the people surrounding him dispersed in turn, opening up a path, all that could be seen was Xu Shi Ji walking over from beyond the crowd.

Xu Shi Ji is the Divine General of the Eastern Decree, deeply trusted by Her Divine Majesty, combined with having a “good” daughter, his status within the government had always been special, but this wasn’t the reason this time as to why the bishops and his colleagues from the government were letting him through, the reason was because they knew of the complex connection

between him and Chen Chang Sheng.

Those personages had all previously spoken to Chen Chang Sheng as if they were his elders, but if one were to speak of actual elders, in the Capital, only Xu Shi Ji and his wife could be considered his elders, more importantly, the betrothal had become a farcical affair, everyone wanted to know what Xu Shi Ji would say to Chen Chang Sheng at a time like this, with a lot of people already having prepared themselves for watching the mockery of Xu Shi Ji.

It became very quiet in front of the hall.

Xu Shi Ji walked over slowly from beyond the crowd and stood before Chen Chang Sheng, his expression was indifferent; looking down upon him from a lofty position.

Chen Chang Sheng greeted him formally, but didn't say anything.

"Your performance in the Grand Examination... wasn't bad," Xu Shi Ji said this while looking at him in the eye, the tone of voice was evidently that of an elder, but upon entering the ears of those present, it felt a little stiff.

Chen Chang Sheng gave it some consideration, but didn't reply.

Xu Shi Ji's brow raised slightly, he then suddenly said: "Come home for dinner tonight."

Hearing those words, the scene became an uproar.

No one said anything, but a lot of people couldn't control themselves from silently criticising him repeatedly, especially those high ranking officials of the tradition faction, who silently cursed him continually for having thick skin that was even thicker than the palace walls; how could someone be so completely shameless?

Outside of everyone's expectations, Chen Chang Sheng answered, after giving it some thought: "Certainly."

Xu Shi Ji stared at him in the eyes, confirming that he really did understand what was being requested and that he really was agreeing. Xu Shi Ji's expression softened slightly, he didn't say anything else, giving a nod towards Chen Chang Sheng and then turning to leave.

After releasing the Banners for the Grand Examination, came a customary parade.

With Chen Chang Sheng as the lead, the examinees boarded special ceremonial carriages. While being surrounded by the masses, they travelled along the government road that was to the side of the River Luo in the Capital, touring a single circle, this required at least four hours.

The entire Capital city was caught in a wildly euphoric atmosphere.

There were fresh flowers and fruits being constantly tossed onto the carriage by the populace. The carriage of Chen Chang Sheng, Gou Han Shi, Guan Fei Bai and Tang Thirty-Six had the most fresh flowers and fruit, if it wasn't for the fact that the government had prior experience and posted an abundance of soldiers to constantly remove them, they would have quite probably been buried by flowers and fruits.

Touring to the Imperial City's Southwestern corner, Chen Chang Sheng felt a little thirsty, without giving it much thought, he took a melon from beside him and took a bite, only feeling that it was fragrant, sweet and crisp, being very enjoyable. However, he could have never expected that his motion would actually incite a rain of melons, striking him to the point of making him hold his head in his hands wordlessly.

His line of sight went from the rain of melons to the Imperial Palace, placing the Pavilion of Ascending Mist within his sights, he could also see the Platform of Sweetdew. He couldn't help but feel that he could see a small dot at the platform; he thought that it was the Black Goat.

He waved towards that direction. He then saw within the crowd, the girl, Shuang'er, who had a complicated expression on her face, upon thinking of the dinner tonight, his waving hand become a little sluggish.

Chapter 184 – Events Of The Past

Countless fresh flowers flew in from the air, landing within the carriage, Chen Chang Sheng retracted his gaze, removing a petal from his lapel, then nodded his head towards the crowd to convey his gratitude, thanking them for their ardour and passion.

At a derelict garden, deep within a location in the Imperial Palace, flowers were also falling; those few Spring plum blossoms that are resistant to the cold, were lightly brushed up by the wind, causing many small, pink coloured pistils to fall. They formed a thin layer on the ground beside the pond, appearing extremely pretty.

His Holiness and Her Divine Majesty stood within this field of fragmentary blossoms, gazing at the Black Dragon Pond that was in front.

“Yesterday, he was in the Education Palace participating in the Grand Examination, he had advanced to the top 16, no? At the time, I said he will only reach up to this point... in the end, unexpectedly, that child didn’t actually stop his steps.”

Her Divine Majesty looked at the flowering trees by the side of the pond and silently reminisced the sentiment of Tong Palace’s history while slowly talking. If she had wanted to stop Chen Chang Sheng obtaining first upon the First Banner in the examination, she would have had countless methods; for example, Mo Yu, who was present on the match grounds at the time, she logically would have done something, but in the end, she didn’t do anything at all.

She looked towards The Pope, her brows lightly arched and said: “Thinking over it now, at the night of the Ivy League gathering, Mo Yu brought that child here, intending to use Tong Palace in order to confine him, that should have been your suggestion?”

His Holiness calmly said: “For Mo Yu, that child, there isn’t much difference between me and Your Divine Majesty, she reveres me the same way she reveres Your Divine Majesty. After the event, even if she was to detect anything strange, she wouldn’t be able to say anything.”

“Mei Li Sha had already been quiet for more than two hundred years, yet starting from last year, when Chen Chang Sheng arrived at the Capital, he suddenly seemed to have become a different person, at the time, I already found it peculiar.”

Her Divine Majesty held her arms together horizontally in front of her, as she walked over to the side of the pond.

Staring at the palaces eaves, blue skies and rolling clouds that were reflected on the water’s surface, she coolly said: “I naturally know that Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy are definitive figures for some old people that are unable to give up, and have made some preparations, but I hadn’t been overly concerned, just as with what I said to Mo Yu on a certain night: my heart can encompass the entire world, how can it possibly not be able to tolerate a mere Orthodox Academy and a single youth?”

Talking up to this point, she turned around and calmly looked at The Pope in the eye, saying: “But since you’ve suddenly expressed your stance and done it twice in succession, I cannot help but feel somewhat wary.”

His Holiness didn't say anything.

For two hundred odd years, the Zhou Empire and subsequently, the entire world's peace and power was mainly attributable to the trust and friendship between The Five Saints, the most important of which, was obviously the friendship between Her Divine Majesty and His Holiness.

Since many years ago, when the late Emperor had ignored governmental affairs and Her Divine Majesty had handled state documents in the Emperor's stead, handling matters of the state, all the way to when she had started to rule from behind the curtain, it gave rise to immeasurable amounts of indignation, protests and attacks.

The most important reason why those dissenters that were opposed to Her Divine Majesty had failed in the end, was because, every time the conflict reached a zenith, His Holiness would inexorably have his Orthodoxy stand firmly by the side of Her Divine Majesty.

Decades ago, when the late Emperor was critically ill, a lot of important figures within the Orthodoxy, alongside the Imperial Chen clan, in an attempt to prevent the Zhou Empire from being truly reigned by a woman, acted very decisively, or perhaps it could be said, they rather rashly staged a rebellion. It was on that day, that Orthodox Academy had been eradicated and the principal personally killed by His Holiness.

Everyone believed that Orthodox Academy's destruction was a testament to the friendship between His Holiness and Her Divine

Majesty, alongside being a display of power. Those within the Orthodoxy who dared to go against His Holiness, alongside those in the old Imperial clan that dared to rebel, they had all died at Orthodox Academy, died in their entirety.

Therefore, why had His Holiness currently changed his stance?

“Chen Chang Sheng... is my disciple nephew,” said His Holiness to Her Divine Majesty calmly.

Silence filled the derelict garden, the chill of the Black Dragon Pond touched upon the face as fragmentary plum blossoms filled the air as if they were snow.

Her Divine Majesty remained silent for a long time, then said: “Taoist Ji?”

His Holiness replied: “Since he is Taoist Ji, he obviously didn’t die that night.”

“So that is how it is, so that really was how it was... but even so, what of it? Don’t tell me you still wish to discuss fellowship with your senior brother? Don’t forget the reason why we made the decision to kill him all those years ago.”

Her Divine Majesty pointed towards a location in the direction of the Black Dragon Pond, a black crow was perched atop a frozen branch.

“For the last decade and more, signs of Black Robe’s activities have been confined to the area around Old Snow City and not Xi Ning Village. What that child from the Qiu Shan clan did some days ago, also testifies to this point.”

His Holiness sighed as he spoke to her: “Perhaps, we really did kill wrongly that year.”

Her Divine Majesty expressionlessly said: “Even if your senior brother isn’t Black Robe, does that mean he doesn’t deserve to die?”

His Holiness didn’t answer that line of questioning, but said: “No matter what, the affairs of those from the previous generation has nothing to do with the next, Chen Chang Sheng is still my disciple nephew, not to mention, that child doesn’t even know of what happened in the past, and currently, there is no longer anyone that dares to go against you, what is the point in you continuing to remember events of the past?”

Hearing these words, Her Divine Majesty became quiet for a while, then suddenly laughed out loudly: “This is also fine.”

His Holiness didn’t show any change to his expression due to her laughter, making it impossible to tell anything about his real state of mind, he said: “The matter of Zhou Garden, what are your thoughts?”

Her Divine Majesty followed the pond’s edge and headed for the opposite side, saying: “Below Star Fusion and above Ethereal

Opening; the time of midsummer; a cycle of ten years; there has been little change.”

His Holiness accompanied her steps, saying: “It will depend upon the results to discernment of The Way at the Mausoleum of Books, who can predict how many examinees will be able to complete their Ethereal Opening.”

Her Divine Majesty stilled her steps, saying: “This matter will have to rely upon you.”

That night, within the Imperial Palace, the elderly Head Eunuch, according to Her Divine Majesty’s confidential orders, had begun to investigate a certain old case, keeping a low profile and quietly starting to move dossiers and old records.

This task wasn’t given to Mo Yu by Her Divine Majesty, but it had nothing to do with trust, the main reason was because this incident is far too old and Mo Yu was far too young at the time. Not to mention, this incident was far too brutal, since Mo Yu didn’t know, it would be best for her to continue not knowing.

This old case, was the starting point of Orthodox Academy’s cleansing over a decade ago.

That year, the late Emperor was continuously upon his sickbed, Her Divine Majesty was harried to the point of rupture, whilst being occupied with governmental affairs, being beleaguered for a time, haggard to the extreme. It was at this period, the old Imperial clan planned to kidnap the sole prince she had at the time.

It was an extremely horrifying affair, with the most horrifying thing being, those few old Imperial clan members had actually succeeded in their plan.

The prince had vanished as such and from then on, no one knew as to whether if he was alive or dead.

Due to this, Her Divine Majesty had completely lost control, in fury, she had all those involved, including two Ducal Princes, put to death, and the entirety of Orthodox Academy had been executed.

Currently, His Holiness has admitted that Orthodox Academy's principal is still alive and that he is Taoist Ji, therefore, is that prince still alive?

If it wasn't for the fact that Chen Chang Sheng's age didn't match, Her Divine Majesty would perhaps be thinking of many more things.

That evening, after Chen Chang Sheng had completed all activities for the Grand Examination's release of the Banners, he returned to Orthodox Academy and changed into a fresh set of clothes. He then left Hundred Blossom Lane, traversing across many small bridges that were concealed within the multitude of streets and alleys in the Capital, crossing the River Luo thrice and countless other canals with names unknown to him, before arriving before the Divine General of the Eastern Decree's estate.

Last year, during Spring, he had come to the Divine General's estate once, that was also the only time. Since that day, almost a year had passed, a lot of things had changed, yet a lot of things had

also remained the same, things such as the estate's solemnity and isolation, as well as the noise of flowing water under the bridge.

Retracting his gaze from the end of the canal, Chen Chang Sheng walked down the stone bridge, arriving in front of the Divine General's estate, he then informed the private guard stationed outside of the estate his identity and was immediately welcomed inside.

Chapter 185 – Family Dinner

The Divine General's estate was very quiet. Within and without the room, apart from the light sound of footsteps and the brushing of fabric upon fabric from clothing, nothing else could be heard, even coughs were absent, this was probably what could be called a household's "style".

The stone that was laid upon the path were as such and even the trees within the courtyard were the same.

Thick and straight, spaced at a fair distance, yet between the branches, there wasn't a lot of green foliage; silent, sombre and cold.

Chen Chang Sheng sat by the side of the table, seeing the porcelain tableware before him that had a considerable feel of age, he didn't know what he should say – from entering the estate till now, there had yet to be any meaningful discourse.

Xu Shi Ji and his wife sat on the main seats, while he sat in a position reserved for guests, Granny Hua stood by one side quietly and reservedly, ready to attend; the one serving the dishes was actually that haughty and delicate to the extreme girl, Shuang'er.

Within the room, were these five people, yet outside of the room, the amount of servants was numerous; several middle-aged stewardesses with cold expressions were glaring at the surroundings; maids would hold table trays and continuously head in and out, as their dresses crossed the high doorsill, it was all rather effortless.

The table trays those maids were holding contained lime juice, contained cold and hot wet towels and contained ivory chopsticks alongside small tiger chopstick rests carved from mahogany; in comparison, trays that held food dishes were far fewer in number.

Tonight's dinner at the Divine General's estate was relatively simple, there was smoked pork belly and pea shoots blanched in superior broth, the dishes were delicious, yet very standard, without the rare and precious sea fish commonly seen in banquets for guests by dignitaries in the Capital, neither was there any soup simmered from the marrow of yao beasts, even the amount of dishes were very few.

Calling it a family dinner; it truly was a standard family dinner.

Chen Chang Sheng mostly understood the reason for Xu Mansion in presenting this kind of posture, and could only use silence in reply, his head was lowered as he ate, yet he noticed that the dinner at Xu Mansion, apart from not having rare fowls, regular poultry was also absent, and even the commonly seen duck gizzard sauce was missing from the tens of condiment sauces present.

He was slightly curious, but didn't inquire.

Once the dishes had all been served, Madam Xu began to converse with him, as with this family dinner, the conversation revolved around monotonous topics, yet didn't touch upon obstinacy from the past.

And thus, a meal drably reached its end, the Divine General's

estate remained as quiet as it had been previously.

Madam Xu gave Xu Shi Ji a glance, raising the wine pot and filling Chen Chang Sheng's cup to the brim.

This was Chen Chang Sheng's second cup of wine for the night.

He gave a word of gratitude.

Xu Shi Ji raised his cup, looked at Chen Chang Sheng, then emptied it.

Chen Chang Sheng also emptied his cup.

Madam Xu poured wine.

Xu Shi Ji once again drank it.

Chen Chang Sheng followed suit.

Madam Xu once again poured the wine.

Xu Shi Ji held his wine cup, looked at Chen Chang Sheng and said, expressionlessly: "I must admit, from beginning to end, I had never felt any benevolence towards you."

Chen Chang Sheng remained silent, not saying anything.

Xu Shi Ji indifferently said: “But everyone would have to admit, I did not bear you any malice, otherwise, you would have had no chance of continuing to remain alive to this point in the Capital, being able to sit opposite me.”

Chen Chang Sheng continued to remain silent, he stood up and took out a paper envelope from within his clothing, placing it upon the table.

That paper envelope was rather thick, and evidently new, though its contents could not be discerned, everyone knew that the item within must be old.

Madam Xu’s expression immediately changed, Granny Hua also showed slight signs of worry, only Shuang’er’s eyes brightened.

“You... what is the meaning of this?”

Xu Shi Ji narrowed his eyes and looked at Chen Chang Sheng, his expression progressively becoming cold, the cup within his hand slowly lowered, though the motion was slow, the moment the cup’s bottom touched the table’s surface, an extremely heavy thud could be heard from the contact.

“I don’t have any other intention; I only want to complete this task. Originally, this should have been completed a year ago; due to some misunderstandings, it had never been successful...”

Chen Chang Sheng looked towards Madam Xu, Granny Hua and Shuang'er, then earnestly said: "I didn't lie back then, I came to the Capital in order to absolve the marriage, but you all refused to believe me."

Hearing these words and seeing the hefty paper envelope on the table, Madam Xu's expression suddenly became exceedingly unsightly, the worry between Granny Hua's brows became even deeper and Shuang'er was evidently very shaken.

"Misunderstanding?" Xu Shi Ji glared at Chen Chang Sheng's eyes, his expression akin to frost, saying: "An entire year, the Capital had been embroiled in a storm, the continent itself in an unending tumult, are you to say all of this is due to just a misunderstanding?"

Chen Chang Sheng didn't answer his question, but instead, looked towards Madam Xu, doing a gesture of courtesy and then saying: "Madam, you previously spoke some words; I have not come after a year, for the express purpose of proving your words wrong. I only think, currently, you probably won't consider me to be a young Taoist priest from the countryside that is trying to cling onto the Divine General's estate in order to change my life, therefore, it's probably time for me to complete this task."

Silence filled the room, the lime juice reflected the lights, akin to heavy liquor. With such an atmosphere, no one said anything; beyond the balustrade, the night wind lightly brushed past, yet it was all the more restless.

After a long period of time that was hard to gauge in length, Xu

Shi Ji looked at Chen Chang Sheng, with a mildly derisive tone, he said: “You’ve done all this, to the point of even audaciously jumping into a violent swell you don’t have the qualifications to touch upon, and it was all due to my wife’s words, because of that pitiful and laughable self-esteem?”

Chen Chang Sheng took some time to carefully consider this, after confirming that what he had done was not overly problematic, he replied: “Self-esteem was indeed the reason, but I don’t think it is laughable, neither do I consider it to be pitiful.”

Xu Shi Ji slowly stood himself up, lifting his hands.

His massive body that was akin to mountain, he leaned forwards slightly, carrying with it a difficult to withstand pressure, he then stared into Chen Chang Sheng’s eyes and said, making each word very clear: “Obtaining first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination, entering the sights of His Holiness, you consider... this to be enough to prove that you are superior to Qiu Shan Jun? That you can serenely and freely withdraw under the guise of a victor?”

Chen Chang Sheng felt slightly startled, thinking to himself that he had never thought this way, he wanted to say a few words in explanation, but found that he didn’t know how to explain such a private matter, as he was thinking this, Xu Shi Ji turned around and left the banquet, after a moment, he came back with a dossier, directly throwing it in front of Chen Chang Sheng.

“Look at it yourself.”

Xu Shi Ji looked at him indifferently and said: “This is no longer a secret, tomorrow, everyone on the continent will come to know of the reason why Qiu Shan Jun did not participate in this year’s Grand Examination.”

Granny Hua and Shuang’er had already quietly left.

Chen Chang Sheng pondered for a moment, then picked up the dossier from the table and opened it. Following the reading of its contents, his expression gradually changed, becoming somewhat complex, understanding the reason as to why Xu Shi Ji said those words.

This year’s Grand Examination was the liveliest in the past decade, indisputably an outstanding year, if there was to be any discussions of regret, then it would probably be that Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong didn’t make an appearance.

With Qiu Shan Jun and Xu You Rong’s bloodline talent and potential, they obviously didn’t need to go through the Grand Examination and would still be able to acquire the right to view the Mausoleum of Books, yet, everyone still wanted to see them at the Grand Examination.

A lot of people thought that the reason why Qiu Shan Jun didn’t appear for this year’s Grand Examination, was perhaps due to Xu You Rong not participating, a bigger possibility was perhaps due to the betrothal between Xu You Rong and Chen Chang Sheng.

After seeing this dossier that had only just been organised, Chen Chang Sheng finally knew the real reason as to why Qiu Shan Jun had not participated in the examination. He quietly contemplated this, finding that he actually couldn't stop himself from wanting to say a word of admiration.

Chapter 186 – The One To Open The Garden

The reason why Qiu Shan Jun didn't participate in this year's Grand Examination, wasn't because of the marriage contract Chen Chang Sheng had placed upon the table, it also wasn't because of that letter from Xu You Rong on the night of the Ivy League gathering, neither was it due to gossip from the world. His reason did not contain any childish temperament, but was because he had to undertake a momentous task.

Qiu Shan Jun had already disappeared from the view of others for several months, even Gou Han Shi and the other fellow-disciples from Li Shan Sword Sect, didn't know where their own senior brother had gone to, that was because this momentous task needed to be absolutely secret.

The masses didn't know as to where he had gone to, neither did he himself, know as to what was currently happening in the world – the marriage-alliance between the North and South, Qiu Shan clan and Li Shan Sword Sect accompanying the Southern Ambassadors to the Capital to propose to the Divine General's estate – Xu You Rong didn't know of this event because it was, intentionally or otherwise, kept secret by Holy Maiden Peak, while Qiu Shan Jun himself really did not know.

Looking at the dossier, Chen Chang Sheng became increasingly quiet.

Qiu Shan Jun had gone to a place called Zhou Garden.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know what kind of place Zhou Garden is, only being able to speculate from the context of the dossier. Zhou Garden was probably a miniature world, or in other words a vestige site.

As with the palace in His Holiness' Green Leaf World, Zhou Garden also had severe restrictions on the cultivation level of those entering it; they needed to be below the level of Star Fusion.

Due to some reason, Zhou Garden was extremely important, being an absolute point of contention between the human world and the demon race, but apart from the previous possessor, Zhou Garden had never been truly controlled by a second person.

Fortunately, upon Zhou Garden's previous possessor disappearing many years ago, it hadn't been completely sealed, but had followed a set pattern, opening once every 10 years.

Before Zhou Garden would truly open, phenomena would appear between heaven and earth and its outermost stone wall will become virtual. At that time, whether human or demon, as long as they could find the gate left behind by the previous possessor and can bring out the key for that gate, they can control Zhou Garden for a period of 10 years.

Of course, if humanity and the demon race were both unable to achieve this, Zhou Garden would once again be sealed, disappearing into the chaotic flow of space that is impossible to explore, quietly awaiting the next 10-year mark to arrive.

There had already been many years where Zhou Garden hadn't been controlled by either humanity or the demon race.

The last time Zhou Garden had been opened, was already several decades ago.

This year was once again the scheduled time for Zhou Garden's opening. The Five Saints had always closely followed this matter, they, alongside those several terrifying Demon Kings at Old Snow City, were the first to detect the strange phenomena between heaven and earth, swiftly sending out seekers.

For the past few hundred years, Zhou Garden's scheduled opening had not affected the world's situation in any way, but those important figures that truly understood Zhou Garden's origin, as well as what was inside, definitely didn't dare to look upon it lightly.

No one could be certain as to what would happen to the world if someone was able to find those few items inside Zhou Garden and bring them out.

Due to these reasons, Zhou Garden's opening, alongside news of its approximate location, needed to be kept absolutely secret, apart from figures on the level of The Five Saints and the head of the Longevity Sect, only those directly involved would be privy to this knowledge.

For the millions upon millions of people living on the continent, they didn't know of this at all. At the time, the Capital was still awaiting the Ivy League gathering's inauguration, while Chen Chang Sheng was vexing over the new door that had suddenly appeared on the academy's wall.

As Zhou Garden is essential, the seekers sent out by the continent's two opposing powers were naturally extraordinary. The demon race had sent many young experts, while The Five Saints, after a round of discussion, had only sent out a single person.

That person, was the one agreed upon by humanity and the yao race, as to being the most powerful person under the realm of Star Fusion, Qiu Shan Jun.

The Five Saints were correct in their judgement, Qiu Shan Jun did indeed not disappoint, he successfully found the gate to Zhou Garden before the demons, bringing out the key, ensuring that Zhou Garden would belong to humanity for the next 10 years.

This was the reason why Qiu Shan Jun couldn't participate in the Grand Examination.

The dossier Xu Shi Ji had Chen Chang Sheng look at, obviously did not elucidate Zhou Garden in any great detail, but Chen Chang Sheng could clearly comprehend Zhou Garden's importance.

What he didn't know was that the reason why humanity could obtain the key before the demon race, apart from being Qiu Shan Jun being far too outstanding, was also due to another reason, and that reason was actually related to him.

Some months previous, an expert from the demon race had tried to assassinate Luo Luo and was stymied by Chen Chang Sheng. After that demon had been captured alive by Xue Xing Chuan and

after being unable to endure the terrible torture of His Grace, Zhou Tong, he revealed some information, allowing the Zhou Government to uncover an intelligence organisation under the control of Black Robe, and at the same time, discovering a line of information related to Zhou Garden.

Qiu Shan Jun had followed this trail, finally securing a position that was ahead of those people from Old Snow City.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know any of this, neither did he know of what hardships and trials Qiu Shan Jun had gone through, he could only rely upon simple information from between the lines of the dossier, imagining what Qiu Shan Jun had done. The more he contemplated, the quieter he became, feeling admiration for that fellow he had never met, but had always looked upon from afar.

“Giving up on the Grand Examination in order to seek prosperity for all of humanity, when this information is spread across the entire continent tomorrow, how much grandeur do you think your first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination will retain in front of him?”

Xu Shi Ji's cold voice shattered the silence in the area.

Chen Chang Sheng placed the dossier back onto the table, silently pondering, since it was as such, why was there this family dinner?

“I have never considered myself to be superior to Qiu Shan Jun, not to mention, whether if that was to be the case or not, I would not come here to end the betrothal only because I am superior to

him.”

He looked at Xu Shi Ji and Madam Xu, saying: “My withdrawal of the engagement really is because I simply want it to end. It’s just, from the start, no one believed me, currently, it is still the same.”

Whether if they believed or didn’t believe, this was something that still had to be done.

Chen Chang Sheng did a gesture of courtesy towards Xu Shi Ji and his wife, then turned around and headed outside.

The old marriage contract that had been sealed with a new paper envelope, calmly lay upon the table.

Beside the stone entrance by the front courtyard, Shuang’er stood under the bamboos, looking at the image of his back. She extended her hand, wanting to cry out and stop him so that she can ask something, but in the end, she didn’t let out any sound and her hand slowly dropped.

What made Chen Chang Sheng feel astonished was, upon his return to Orthodox Academy, he shockingly found that the marriage contract was currently laid atop the table in the library, it had actually returned even faster than he had.

“What... is this about?” he received the marriage contract that Tang Thirty-Six handed over, feeling a little bewildered.

Tang Thirty-Six said: “Shouldn’t it be you explaining to us as to what is going on? Why is the Divine General’s estate the one sending the marriage contract back? Don’t tell me you still want to break off the engagement?”

Chen Chang Sheng was silent for a moment, before saying: “I went tonight in order to end the engagement.”

Tang Thirty-Six was slightly stunned and asked: “Why do you want to end the engagement? Don’t tell me Xu You Rong isn’t worthy of you?”

Chen Chang Sheng didn’t answer this question, he took the marriage contract and turned around, heading for the outside.

He was preparing to go to Li Palace.

Since the Divine General’s estate was unwilling to end the engagement, then all he could do was to trouble His Holiness.

In the end, someone that wishes to absolve a marriage, needs someone that administers marriages.

Chapter 187 – The Beautiful Maiden Of The Xu Clan; Zhou Lang's Former Land

Tang Thirty-Six directly extended his hand, dragging him back, shaking his head and saying: “Don’t bother going.”

Chen Chang Sheng gave him a glance, asking: “Why?”

Tang Thirty-Six patted his shoulder and said: “When that handmaiden, Shuang’er, brought the marriage contract back over, she also helped to pass on a message from Xu Shi Ji to you, I trust, after hearing those words, you would probably no longer wish to end the engagement, and even if you do, you wouldn’t be seeking His Holiness.”

“What words?” asked Chen Chang Sheng.

Tang Thirty-Six replied: “Xu Shi Ji said, he had heard that you previously said to someone in the Divine General’s estate, that only if Xu You Rong was to personally see you and express her wish to end the engagement, would you agree. Therefore, from tonight onwards, the betrothal between you and Xu You Rong, will no longer be something he would interfere with as a father, he will no longer pay it any attention, but if you wish to end the engagement, then you will have to see Xu You Rong in person and tell her yourself that you no longer want this marriage.”

Chen Chang Sheng was slightly dazed after hearing those words. He was only a youth, how could he possibly compare with a personage such as Xu Shi Ji, who was shrewd and unscrupulous, or

perhaps better said to be shameless; he had never expected that events would develop this way.

He didn't harbour any good feelings towards Xu You Rong, neither did he like her, after so many things, even the curiosity and yearning he had all those years ago were now completely non-existent, however, she had sent that letter on the night of the Ivy League gathering, and because of that letter, no matter what her real intentions were, he was very grateful to her and didn't wish to do anything else that might harm her.

“Don't tell me Xu Shi Ji really thinks this way?” he openly and honestly told Tang Thirty-Six of his thoughts, then frowned, asking in an extremely distressed and anxious manner.

Tang Thirty-Six gave a sneer and said: “Don't try and compare with someone like Xu Shi Ji in scheming, you're only fifteen this year, no matter how tightly you frown it won't appear profound, it will only appear to be a feign of profundity that is laughable.”

Chen Chang Sheng asked: “Then what does he actually want?”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him like as if he was looking at an idiot and said: “Xu Shi Ji's intent is so obvious, yet you actually can't even see it? Since he currently doesn't want to end the engagement, he found some excuse to push it to your side, wanting you to end it with Xu You Rong in person in order for it to be valid. It's very evident that he has determined, once you've met Xu You Rong in person and seen his precious daughter, you would definitely be unable to speak of ending the engagement.”

Chen Chang Sheng didn't understand, asking: "Why?"

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him in the eyes, confirming that he really didn't understand, he couldn't stop himself from sighing, saying: "Because after seeing Xu You Rong in person, no one would be able to stop themselves from wanting to be with her."

Chen Chang Sheng still couldn't understand and continued to ask: "Why?"

Tang Thirty-Six felt annoyed, but didn't know how to explain this, something anyone would be able to logically understand. After a long while, he grated out several words: "Because she is pretty."

It was obviously not such a simple reason, but it was the simplest and most direct reason Tang Thirty-Six could quickly think of, that was probably also the most likely to sway a fool such as Chen Chang Sheng.

Of course, this made him feel defeated in terms of aesthetics or some other related aspect, therefore, he became very angry, with his voice becoming loud as a result; coincidentally, the word "pretty" creates an explosive sound, and thus, a waterfall appeared in the night before the library.

A moment's silence. Chen Chang Sheng took out a handkerchief, carefully wiping his own face clean, he then headed for the dorm, the image of his back looking very desolate, only appearing again after a long period of time.

Tang Thirty-Six thought of his mysophobia, apologising extremely earnestly.

Chen Chang Sheng had finished bathing, his complexion was invigorating and his heart without blemish, he waved his hand to express that it was fine, but his expression seemed a little hesitant, he then said, in a low tone: “Is she... really that pretty?”

That night, the youths of Orthodox Academy were having a serious discussion as to why the Divine General of the Eastern Decree’s estate would suddenly change its decision, agreeing to the betrothal with Chen Chang Sheng.

Chen Chang Sheng thought that it might have been due to his performance at the Grand Examination being all too spectacular, it was refuted by Tang Thirty-Six with a sneer.

Tang Thirty-Six thought that Xu Shi Ji’s change of attitude was probably related to the current political situation and Xu Shi Ji’s judging of the situation.

The current situation of the Zhou Dynasty was already very different from how it was many years ago. No matter whether if Her Divine Majesty wished to or not, she still had to consider the question of to whom the throne will be passed on to; at present, it seems the Princes and Dukes that were dispersed across the world, all had the chance, Prince Chen Liu was also a possibility, but the Tian Hai clan had no hope at all.

It was still that same phrase, subjects of the Zhou Empire could accept Her Divine Majesty’s reign, but couldn’t possibly accept continued rule from her family, a lot of people were still waiting

for the clan name of Chen to return.

Especially because in the course of Chen Chang Sheng obtaining first upon the First Banner in the Grand Examination, His Holiness had already expressed such an attitude.

Xu Shi Ji is Her Divine Majesty's trusted aide, but he had to take his estate's future into consideration – Chen Chang Sheng and Orthodox Academy had clearly already received His Holiness' approval; through this marriage, more long-term support could be attained, even if it was to fail, Xu Shi Ji still didn't hope for Chen Chang Sheng to retain too much hostility.

After hearing Tang Thirty-Six's analysis, Chen Chang Sheng felt that it had some logic, thinking to himself that children from the gentry really were different from himself. He then turned his head, preparing to ask for Xuan Yuan Po's opinion, but found that the yao youth had already fallen asleep, akin to a towering mountain.

The next morning, at the fifth hour, Chen Chang Sheng woke up on schedule, rousing Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po, then arrived at the gatehouse and began to roast meat; this was something they had agreed upon the day before last, a celebration with Jin Yu Lu.

The gift records and name cards were all in the academy's storeroom and for the time being, no one came to disturb the academy's peace, all the way until the Spring Sun had slowly reached a peak in the sky, that information which had spread within the city of Chang'an for half a day, had finally arrived at their location.

An entire misty warthog that had been eaten till only its bones and two long tusks remained, was hung above the pyre, its image appearing extremely hideous, with drops of oil flowing along the remaining meat scraps and falling below, landing on the charcoal fire below that was on the verge of going out, letting out sizzling hisses, causing Tang Thirty-Six, who was stunned and speechless, to come to his senses.

“Just what exactly did Qiu Shan Jun do? To actually have the two altars, Northern and Southern, of the Orthodoxy, alongside the Zhou Government and White Emperor City to all issue an edict as a show of commendation? Your first upon the First Banner has yet to even warm in the hand, and yet it has already been beaten.”

Tang Thirty-Six said this while looking at Chen Chang Sheng sympathetically, but found that Chen Chang Sheng was taciturn and silent, his expression evidently showed that he already knew of this, Tang Thirty-Six couldn't help feeling slightly surprised: “You know of this?”

Chen Chang Sheng replied: “I've known since last night at the Divine General's estate.”

“Then why didn't you tell me this last night?”

“I forgot.”

It was quiet within the gatehouse of the academy, only the sound of oil dropping upon the ashes of the fire could be heard.

“Being missing for half a year, was actually an intentional attempt at obscurity. Following the organisation left behind in the human world by Black Robe, counter-seeking Zhou Garden’s location, this kind of ability and achievement, is indeed incredible.”

Jin Yu Lu returned to the room and conveyed the news he had just received from Li Palace. The information within was obviously a lot more detailed than that which was being spread within the Capital, it felt rather moving.

For Tang Thirty-Six, who was on the same side as Chen Chang Sheng, upon hearing these words, it obviously didn’t feel all that pleasant, but it was undeniable – Qiu Shan Jun, without any sort of support, had contended for many days against those violent and powerful young experts of the demon race, finally succeeding in opening Zhou Garden first.

It could be imagined as to what kind of perilous battles and perhaps, maybe even life and death trials, he had experienced; the Grand Examination appeared intense, but its battles that were actually strictly monitored, were of no comparison.

“That organisation?” Chen Chang Sheng gave a glance towards Jin Yu Lu.

Jin Yu Lu nodded, it was only then, he came to understand that this incident was actually connected to the assassination attempt on Luo Luo. That assassin who was captured by Xue Xing Chuan was probably a member of that organisation.

“What exactly is Zhou Garden?”

This was currently the biggest question for the three youths of Orthodox Academy.

Chen Chang Sheng and Xuan Yuan Po had lived in rural areas and the wilderness since they were young, and the scriptures didn't have any records of this, as for Tang Thirty-Six, a child of the aristocracy, even he hadn't heard of Zhou Garden before; in his memories, when his Grandfather had held him on his lap as a child, drinking and recounting the past, these two words had never been mentioned.

“The Education Palace, or perhaps the Green Leaf World of His Holiness, is a miniature world.”

Jin Yu Lu's expression subconsciously became stern as he thought of that person's name, perhaps even being a little reverent: “Zhou Garden, is the miniature world of Zhou Du Fu.”

Zhou Du Fu, for the past thousand years, the strongest person on the continent.

Whether be it humanity, the demon race or the yao race, or those few secret tribes that lived in restricted areas or dangerous forests, even when considering all of them together, he was still the strongest.

Many years ago, he had casually travelled afar, and from then onwards, there was no longer any news of him, a lot of people believed that he was dead, while many others believed that he had travelled to another world; no matter what, once he had left, he no longer returned, only leaving behind a miniature world.

That miniature world, is Zhou Garden.

Chapter 188 – Ascending Upwards On Stairs

“What is there inside Zhou Garden? Treasure?”

“There should be weapons or manuals for discipline arts from the supreme experts Zhou Du Fu defeated all those years ago, of course, the most important thing will be that his own legacy could very likely also have been left inside Zhou Garden.”

“Will everything found within Zhou Garden after entering, belong to yourself? You don’t need to hand it over to the government?”

“The basic principle is to base rewards upon merit, of course, even though Zhou Garden is enticing, wanting to probe deeply is a very dangerous task, not to mention there will also be many opponents of the same level. Therefore, the more important significance behind Zhou Garden is that it is the most appropriate testing ground for young cultivators.”

“Wouldn’t those elders or experts enter Zhou Garden in order to fight over the treasure?”

“The legacy disciples of those few scattered individuals, or perhaps old monsters, will take the risk and enter the garden, but they also have to keep in mind the attitude of The Five Saints, I trust they wouldn’t do anything overly excessive.”

Many years ago, during the legendary battle at Luoyang, Zhou Du Fu had defeated Emperor Taizong of the Zhou Dynasty. His Royal

Majesty would have definitely lost something to him. At an even earlier time, outside of Old Snow City, he had defeated the Demon Lord that had once been renowned as to being the strongest. The incredibly powerful Tian Luo that had been in the Demon Lord's hands was severely damaged, causing it to continuously plummet on the Banner of Hundred Armaments, in the end, it was only useful for cloaking an assassination attempt at Orthodox Academy.

From just this point, it could be seen as to how much influence Zhou Du Fu had had on this continent, how deeply and how absolute. In his life, who knew just how many peerless experts had he actually defeated? If the weapons or discipline arts of those peerless experts were left inside Zhou Garden, they would be the biggest treasure there.

Not to mention, as with what Jin Yu Lu had said, Zhou Du Fu had already disappeared for hundreds of years; perhaps dead, perhaps having shattered the void, no matter what the situation was, his legacy was probably left behind in Zhou Garden.

The legacy of the continent's foremost expert... even just the very thought would shake someone's mind, causing them to be unable to calm down.

After listening to Jin Yu Lu's account, Chen Chang Sheng and the others finally came to have a real understanding of this situation, the gatehouse became even quieter, the droplets of oil that were accumulating upon the tip of the tusks became ever greater in size.

A Zhou Garden as such, who wouldn't want to enter?

For a great many years, Zhou Garden had opened as scheduled, shaking the continent, but its definite location wasn't something that could be confirmed every time; this year, Zhou Garden's location had finally been confirmed once again, as a result, this meant the Zhou Government would definitely send a large amount of people into Zhou Garden in order to explore, attempting to find the genuine treasures.

What Qiu Shan Jun had done, was only to find the door to Zhou Garden and obtain the key to the garden itself. The vast mist outside of Zhou Garden gradually faded away, yet the world within still remained secretive.

However, this miniature world that opens once every ten years, had a very strict requirement on the level of cultivators that wished to enter, but it wasn't a difficult to understand criteria – only those who are in the realm of Ethereal Opening can survive within.

Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po subconsciously looked towards the direction of Chen Chang Sheng. In the final match of the Grand Examination, Chen Chang Sheng had inexplicably completed his Ethereal Opening, therefore, he naturally had the prerequisite to enter Zhou Garden.

Chen Chang Sheng shook his head, he was certain that the final number of young cultivators who could enter Zhou Garden, will definitely be more numerous than current, that's because tomorrow is the date for entering the Mausoleum of Books to discern The Way.

“Tomorrow, prepare medicine and crystals, striving to be able to break through realm levels while inside the mausoleum.” He looked at Tang Thirty-Six and Xuan Yuan Po, then said: “At the time, we’ll enter Zhou Garden together.

Jin Yu Lu said: “Her Highness will also enter the Mausoleum of Books tomorrow.”

Chen Chang Sheng said: “Then all four of us will enter together.”

In truth, Chen Chang Sheng wasn’t overly concerned with Zhou Garden, that’s because it was too far away....in truth, counting the time, it wasn’t really all that far away, but his thoughts were on what was before him, on tonight.

Tonight, he had to enter the palace to do what he must do, and he absolutely had to finish that task, only through that, would worldly events such treasure, such as legends, become important to him.

That evening, as twilight was at its deepest, a horse carriage slowly came to a stop in front of the Imperial Palace. Tang Thirty-Six hopped out first, following this, Xuan Yuan Po caused the ground to lightly tremble, then Chen Chang Sheng walked down from the carriage.

Before the Imperial Palace, it was filled with people. Nearby were the young students from the various academies and sects, farther away, were those from the populace that had come to observe the

revelry; the wish of those from the Capital for merriment was something that couldn't be affected by the time or the weather.

Seeing the three from Orthodox Academy, especially Chen Chang Sheng, the sounds of discussion from the masses immediately rose, the expressions on the young examinees also had some changes.

Tonight, from the Grand Examination's Three Banners, a total of 42 examinees were all attending Her Divine Majesty's banquet that was being held at the Hall of Brilliance, singing, dancing and drinking in celebration, they would then stay at the palace and directly head for the Mausoleum of Books on the second night.

Only Chen Chang Sheng, who had obtained first upon the First Banner, couldn't participate in this banquet, but instead, had to quietly contemplate alone in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist for a night, because this was the rule.

The changes in expression for the populace and examinees was due to this. The Pavilion of Ascending Mist is a sacred edifice, and also a guarded and restricted location, only during the Great Rites or when the government has had something significant occur, would the sovereign enter the structure, apart from this, only the Grand Examination's first upon the First Banner would be allowed to perform quiet contemplation inside for a night.

Outwardly, this naturally appeared to be a hard to come by honour, but in reality, no one considered this to be a good thing.

Within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, there definitely would not

be bedding; quiet contemplation for a night would likely require sitting on your knees; not mentioning sleep, even wanting to rest for a while would be something extremely difficult. Being as such for an entire night, by morning you would definitely be very fatigued and weary, being greatly affected when you enter the Mausoleum of Books to discern The Way.

No one could understand why Emperor Taizong had set this rule all those years ago, they could only conclude that the mighty ruler wanted to increase the loyalty of each Grand Examination's first upon the First Banner towards the government through this method.

However, through the passage of years and moons, this kind of rule had become nothing more than a rule, being disremembered to the point of disregard by many; only for Chen Chang Sheng, was this rule not simply a rule, but was instead, an important event. Leaving Xi Ning Village, coming to the Capital, entering Orthodox Academy, participating in the Grand Examination and experiencing so many hardships and danger... all of these things were for this sole reason.

Under the escort of countless gazes, he walked through the lonely and cold palace door.

Under the lead of a head eunuch, he headed for the deepest part of the palace, passing the derelict garden and the Palace of Embodied Light. These were all places he had once been to; he then saw the towering palace wall to the West and the green ivy that climbed up on the wall, knowing that Orthodox Academy and the Hundred Herb Garden were in that direction.

The farther into the Imperial Palace they went, the quieter it became, to the point where it could perhaps even be called secluded; previously, they would occasionally see some palace maids and eunuchs, but now, none could be seen. The ceremonial music from the faraway Hall of Brilliance had also become increasingly faint, as if it had become the sound from a separate world. It finally completely vanished, a wake of silence.

That head eunuch had quietly left at some unknown time.

Only Chen Chang Sheng and a lone building remained.

That tall structure loomed ahead solitarily; there was no possibility of mistaking it, it was the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

Even without guidance, he would not be lost, because there was only a single path to the pavilion.

The Pavilion of Ascending Mist is extremely tall, and the path, extremely straight, being formed from countless stone steps.

Night had already enveloped the Capital and a myriad of stars had once again arrived unto the human realm.

Starlight shone onto the stone steps, covering them with a faint layer of brilliance. Gazing at it from below to above, the steps seemed without end, as if they were to lead up into the highest reaches of the night sky.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any hesitation, following along the steps and heading towards the pavilion that was within the darkness. His steps were very steady, yet not slow; the hands that were by his sides were lightly clenched into fists, representing his nervousness and anticipation.

A gust of wind blew in and his clothing fluttered; sounds of rustling abounded.

Chapter 189 – The Eighth Portrait Within The Pavilion

The steps were level and wide, with small markings engraved upon them, these weren't patterns, they were only for the purpose of avoiding slipping. Though the stone steps were long, the sides didn't have any railings or ropes, akin to arriving at a deep abyss. Yet walking upon them, it was very stable, as if one would never err in their steps, perhaps, this was intended as guidance and protection for later generations, from those who had constructed these stairs all those years ago.

Staring at the never-ending stone steps, they still had to have a moment of conclusion; Chen Chang Sheng quietly and calmly walked on, after a long period of time he finally arrived above the night sky.

At the end of the steps was a flat space, in the centre was a pavilion constructed of wooden beams and stone bricks. This building covered an extremely vast area and was also extremely tall, but due to being far away from the ground and humanity, it appeared extremely lonely.

Staring into the far away dusk; within what could be sighted, only the Platform of Sweetdew's form could be seen; the legendary Luminous Pearls gave off a faint brilliance, looking as if they were lamps.

Within the entirety of the Imperial Palace, or even the entire Capital, apart from the Platform of Sweetdew, his current position was the highest, being able to see all the streets and alleys of the

Capital; at times when the weather was good, it was even possible to see the faraway Ba Willow, but Chen Chang Sheng did not observe and appreciate the faraway surroundings, that's because it was currently deep into the night and it was not possible to see features on the ground clearly, more importantly, he was currently not in the mood for appreciating the view.

After his gaze was retracted from the Platform of Sweetdew, it fell upon the solitary structure and didn't shift, his expression didn't change, yet the emotion in his heart had already started to become tumultuous.

From Xi Ning Village to the Capital; thousands upon thousands of storms.

He had finally arrived before the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

The Pavilion of Ascending Mist didn't have a name plate, didn't have any lanterns, neither were there any splendid decorations. All it had were beams of wood alongside green stone walls that carried a natural sense of austerity. Not a single ray of light, making it appear all the more silent.

The entrance also did not have a lock, as if all one had to was to push and it would open.

Chen Chang Sheng stood before the doors, remaining quiet for a moment, settling his nerves and mood, it wasn't until his breathing had become absolutely stable that he finally raised his hands and placed them upon the doors. He lightly pushed

forwards.

There wasn't any creaking, smooth to the point of resembling a leaf alighting upon water. The Pavilion of Ascending Mist's doors slowly opened, a ray of light gushed out from the crevice between the doors. Following the gap's widening, more light spilled out, falling upon his body and clearly illuminating his face that had been mildly startled.

The light that spilled out from the pavilion was white in colour, illuminating his still slightly young looking face to the point of making it resemble jade; due to this, his brows appeared all the darker, heavily resembling lines of ink drawn from a brush.

Chen Chang Sheng couldn't understand. Why was it so bright within, with so many rays of light? Why couldn't any of it be seen from outside previously? Could it be, that all those windows are fake?

While thinking of these things, he actions did not become slow; the doors were opened to about a foot wide, he raised his foot and crossed the doorsill, entering, entering the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

As his left foot had just touched the floor, the doors once again closed behind him. He involuntarily turned his head around to look, after seeing the tightly closed doors he became momentarily silent. He could vaguely deduce that he was now the same as the blazing white light that was within the pavilion, in that it was also no longer possible for anyone outside to see him.

Looking at this from a different perspective, from the moment he

pushed open those doors and entered the pavilion, he had been separated from the real world.

That thought only took a moment. He turned his head back around, looking forwards, all he saw was a glow of splendour.

Within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, there were no lights, neither were there tallow candles or Luminous Pearls. If those doors and windows had some sort of array on them that could completely block out the sun, wind and sound, then at this very moment, it should be pitch black, and what of the light that had previously leaked out of the door, where had it come from?

He closed his eyes, heading towards that blazing white light, due to the light being too piercing, he couldn't see clearly as to what was inside, neither could he see the much rumoured portraits of distinguished government ministers. He was just akin to a moth that was flying towards the flame of a light, only being able to rely upon the most instinctual, or perhaps basic of feelings, heading forwards.

Yet, he had only stepped forwards a single step, and was forced to stop.

This was because he felt an extremely terrifying presence, the presence came from every location in the pavilion, coming from every single ray of light; that presence was austere, holy, bloody and tyrannical, having countless different characteristics, yet they all had a common essence: that of being powerful, unimaginably powerful.

That powerful presence fell upon his clothing, fell upon his brows, boring through his skin and flowing into his blood vessels, directly entering the deepest parts of his organs; with only an instant, it had completed a cycle.

Chen Chang Sheng had no way of resisting this presence. Before this presence, he was akin to the most pitiful ant, with no way to react, even lacking the ability to muster the courage to resist.

The presence cycled through his body, without and within, multiple times, but didn't bring him any harm, however, with only this contact, his divine sense had begun to violently become unstable, if it was to continue for slightly longer, his sea of consciousness would break, being directly crushed into dust by the presence.

Luckily, the presence didn't persist for too long a time, as his toppling structure within was fast approaching the moment of touching the ground in collapse, it suddenly changed into a gust of wind, lightly and lithely leaving his body, disappearing out of sight.

It had only been a moment, yet Chen Chang Sheng's clothing had already been soaked through with sweat.

He composed his mind, then continued to raise his steps and move forwards, luckily, on the landing of his second step, there weren't any other strange events, unlike the previous, where it was as if he had placed himself in the midst of a cruel battle.

The light was still intense, he narrowed his eyes and headed for the brightest and most intense location, he could vaguely see within his sights a light that resembled a blossoming flower, understanding that it was probably the source.

He extended his hand and reached for that blazing flower of light, upon coming into contact with his finger, it wasn't burning, but cool, very pleasant; his fingers traced it upwards, finally tightly clenching it within his hand.

Under his grasp, the light immediately receded, the incandescent building gradually became dim. He narrowed his eyes and could, with much difficulty, clearly make out some paintings, until finally, everything became normal.

It was only then, he found that he was grasping a torch within his hand.

The material of the torch was neither gold or jade, but closer to glass, yet it wasn't clear. The surface was of a milky white colour that had countless dots which glittered akin to crystal, within each dot, it seemed as if they contained vast amounts of energy.

The torch was the blossoming flower of light from previous, after being grasped by him, the light gradually receded and coalesced, becoming this current visage, only leaving a white flame at its tip.

That flame wasn't fierce, but very beautiful, akin to fireworks during the day, hard to properly distinguish, but able to create a

crisp and imposing sense of something striking through gloomy skies.

Chen Chang Sheng looked at the torch and vaguely remembered that he had once seen in the Scriptures of The Way, some records. Very long ago, on the Banner of Hundred Armaments, the demon race had a divine armament that was called Fireworks of Daylight. Could it be, that this torch is that legendary divine armament? Back when the conflict was still ongoing, it was seized and brought back to the Capital by the generals of Emperor Taizong?

With a thought as such, he felt the torch in his hand becoming very heavy, he was then reminded that he was currently already standing within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, standing within humanity's glorious history.

He subconsciously looked around the surroundings, all that could be seen was that the pavilion contained nothing, no tables, no chairs, only the very centre had a prayer mat, causing the building to appear all the more spacious and empty, perhaps even a little lonely.

This building didn't resemble a place for people to live in. In truth, the Pavilion of Ascending Mist wasn't used for residing in, but was used to venerate portraits – the tens of portraits that were up on the grey walls.

Chen Chang Sheng raised the torch and headed towards the wall, standing before the first painting.

That portrait was of a middle-aged aristocrat, three heavy lines of facial hair, eyes full of smiles, but the distance between the eyes was slightly wide, giving others a feeling of detachment, this was an illustrious individual with the mantle of a hero, the Duke of Zhao.

Seeing this outstandingly famous elder brother-in-law of Emperor Taizong, Chen Chang Sheng became silent for a moment, after paying his respects however, he didn't dwell too long, moving onto the others.

The second portrait was of the Prince of Hejian, Chen Gong. The third was of the Duke of Lai, Du Ruyu. The fourth was of the renowned Duke of Wei, while the fifth was of the Duke of Zheng, who had an even more renowned wife...

Before these portraits, Chen Chang Sheng respectively paid his respects, but didn't still his steps, that was until he arrived before the eighth portrait. The expression on his face finally had some change.

Chapter 190 – That Ray Of Light Within History

The eighth portrait within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist is of Wang Zhi Ce.

For those who had even a small understanding of history, they would clearly know that Wang Zhi Ce is a real legend. He had come from a background of poverty, without any sort of talent for cultivation, yet had successfully entered Heavenly Academy to study.

During the period of Emperor Taizu, he had held the post of a regular scribe within the government, until, at the age of forty, he had suddenly discerned The Way in a single night.

Starlight projected upon the entirety of Chang'an, and he direct entered Ethereal Opening from Purification, subsequently becoming an expert of the generation.

What made others sigh out praises all the more was, Wang Zhi Ce was learned on both the north and south, being especially gifted on military strategy and tactics. He had accompanied Emperor Taizong multiple times on northern campaigns, finally becoming the Deputy Marshal of the alliance army, commanding the army to successively break the demon race's main force, even taking a single mount to break through the snow plains, successfully killing Helan Shanxia that was not even 800 miles away from Old Snow city.

If it was to be only in terms of military accolades, perhaps only considering the importance of the conflict that happened in that period, Wang Zhe Ce was the most dazzling amongst those shining

stars, the only person that could be compared with His Royal Majesty, Emperor Taizong.

With his impressive achievements, he naturally had the right to place eighth upon the portraits of esteemed officials within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist; perhaps, according to the views of the masses, he should have been ranked higher, at least needing to be ranked within the top three.

The reason for his ranking of eighth within the pavilion was very simple. It was because his military achievements and standing amongst the populace was too high, to the point where it had reached the ability to overshadow his liege.

More importantly, during the Hundred Herb Garden incident that happened during Taizu Emperor's later years, he had not quickly made his stance apparent, unlike the Duke of Zhao, Chen Gong, Qin Zhong and Yu Gong, to firmly stand on the side of Emperor Taizong.

Because of this, even if he was to have achieved even more accolades, he couldn't acquire Emperor Taizong's absolute trust.

His loyalty in the end was still questioned, due to this, upon the end to the great war, he had retired and returned home, no longer participating in governmental affairs.

Standing before the painting, gazing at the middle-aged man who held a jade rod in hand with a calm expression, Chen Chang Sheng remained silent for a very long time, he then continued to look at the remaining portraits.

Following this, he saw the portraits of Qin Zhong and Yu Gong, these two Divine Generals that had served by the side of Emperor Taizong all those years ago, had boundless might, and also still had boundless repute, because currently, whether be it within the

Imperial Palace or amongst the populace, upon their doors they would post portraits of the two; those portraits were exactly the same as the ones inside the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

These two Divine Generals were the same as the other virtuous forebears within the pavilion: still human, yet already idols.

Chen Chang Sheng's legs and gaze slowly moved, the jade-like torch remained tightly grasped in his hand; upon the grey walls, the light and darkness shifted slightly; the people within the portraits seemingly had an increase to their sentiment.

The people of these paintings were all the same as Wang Zhi Ce, they were all legends of the past, with their own respective legends – the atmosphere with the pavilion was very solemn and dignified, yet the people within the paintings were not as such, they all differed, some appeared very mischievous, such as Divine General Cheng Mingjie, while some were very stern and serious, such as the Duke of Zheng.

Without having used too much time, Chen Chang Sheng had finished observing the twenty-four portraits on the Eastern wall, these were esteemed officials that had originally received such an honour when Emperor Taizong had constructed the Pavilion of Ascending Mist all those years ago.

There were tens of other portraits remaining, these were esteemed officials who were subsequently entered into the pavilion during the reign of the late Emperor and Her Divine Majesty.

Chen Chang Sheng became ever quieter. From Emperor Taizu's revolution of the previous dynasty, to Emperor Taizong's

consolidation of the empire, and then to Her Divine Majesty's taking of the throne; within the history of these long thousand years, a lot of significant events had happened.

Those within the pavilion were all witnesses, they were important figures that really existed within history, in other words, they were history.

Walking within the pavilion was walking within the long flow of history itself. Those paintings had the melancholy of history and more so, the weight of history. Countless secrets accompanied those that had passed, into oblivion; quietly, without words, but those secrets were here, supporting countless world-shaking histories.

If the virtuous forebears within the portraits could come to life, or perhaps, if they could leave behind any sort of information for later generations to perceive and understand, those scholars that studied history would definitely no longer have any regrets.

Observing all the paintings within the pavilion took around an hour; Chen Chang Sheng returned to the prayer mat in the centre of the building; he then stood in place and began to ponder over something.

Momentarily after, a bell resounded, the sound came in from the ground and was slightly far away, making everything appear all the more secluded and quiet, but all it did was to rouse him from his thoughts, unable to still his mind.

Following the sound, the torch that had been held in his hand all this time, suddenly snuffed out, the pavilion instantly became pitch black, from the gaps of the doors and windows, not a single

ray of light came through.

Chen Chang Sheng looked around in the darkness, coming to understand something.

For the Grand Examination's first upon the First Banner to quietly contemplate in the pavilion for a night, they first had to achieve peace. Within the pavilion, there were no distractions of the mind from outside, the bell chimes were serene, and at this moment, it was also difficult to see anything. Apart from quietly sitting upon the prayer mat and contemplating, there was nothing else to do.

The Zhou Government wished for the portraits within the pavilion, alongside the presence that had initially appeared, to get closer with the person that came in for contemplation, to the point where they would be in harmony, where they would have the mentality of staunchly serving the empire's Imperial clan, to serve Her Divine Majesty.

The first upon the First Banner for the last few years; if they weren't a disciple of Li Shan Sword Sect then they would still be a southerner, and would naturally not harbour too much loyalty towards the Zhou Government.

Not to mention, those who could enter the pavilion would resist the powerful presence, naturally resulting in the situation not being able to fulfil the wishes of the person who originally made this rule, to solidify the mentality of those entering.

Chen Chang Sheng is from the Zhou Empire, and really could probably complete the initial wishes of the person who designed the Grand Examination; the only thing was, since he could enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, he couldn't settle his heart, his

thoughts couldn't lie upon the future of the country and its people, or upon the unification of humanity. It could only fall upon smaller or perhaps more personal things.

Time slowly and silently passed by; as with before, not a single ray of light appeared.

Chen Chang Sheng did not sit on the prayer mat and quietly pass through a night like the past first upon the First Banners; he untied the short sword from his waist, his left hand held the scabbard and he then thrust it into the space in front of him. Within the pitch darkness inside of the pavilion that resembled night, fingers cannot be seen from an extended hand. The short sword also disappeared from sight, but from his leaving of Xi Ning Village, the short sword had rarely left his side; he very familiarly raised his right hand, accurately clasping onto the hilt.

His two hands slowly separated, yet the short sword didn't leave its scabbard, what he drew out was not the sword but a ball of light, akin to the dawn's first rising; the pavilion's interior was immediately illuminated.

A perfectly spherical Luminous Pearl appeared within the palm of his right hand.

A soft light illuminated the grey walls and lit up the floorboards through the gaps between his fingers, behind him, a long shadow was cast; through the gradual brightening of the Luminous Pearl, that shadow gradually faded.

He was certain that the gaps of the windows and doors of the pavilion wouldn't leak any light, therefore he didn't worry.

He raised the Luminous Pearl and headed toward the portrait.

Walking within the quiet pavilion, the night was scattered by the radiance within his palm, on the verge of revealing its truth. He looked at the people upon the portraits, feeling that those depicted were very similar to himself.

He suppressed the strange feeling, and once again walked before the portrait of Wang Zhi Ce.

He grasped the short sword and stabbed its sharp tip in the gap between the green bricks on the side of the portrait, then slowly and carefully pushed forwards. The hands that held onto the sword lightly trembled, with the fingers becoming pale.

Chapter 191 – Fate's Box

The Luminous pearl was placed in front of his feet, close to the wall, causing rays of light to travel upwards from below; the short sword that was pierced into the wall had its shadow drawn out, reaching all the way to the ceiling, as if it was a black pillar.

Inch by inch, the short sword slowly cut into the wall, gradually being swallowed. Chen Chang Sheng grasped the hilt and focused upon the point of contact between the two; his breathing slowly hastened and his expression became increasingly nervous.

His concentration was focused upon the sword, as if he was walking on a night path that didn't have any lights, unknown as to what he would encounter ahead. This feeling of being completely in the unknown: apart from trepidation, a sense of unease ruled.

Finally, the short sword conveyed back to him a clean and clear feeling; it had sharply and deeply pierced into the wall by half a foot, touching upon some sort of hard object. Chen Chang Sheng stared at the wall in front of him, staying quiet for a moment, then once again applied force, affirming that the sword would have difficulty penetrating any deeper.

He felt slightly bewildered, not knowing as to what the object within was made of, that even his sword was unable to pierce it, at the same time, he also confirmed that the object was what he had been looking for.

He released his left hand and raised his arm, using his sleeve to wipe away the sweat on his forehead, he then once again grasped the sword hilt. This time, he didn't try to penetrate deeper, but

began to move about on the surface, relying solely upon the feedback from his hand; the short sword slowly cut open the hard and robust green stone wall, apart from the lightly floating stone fragments, not a trace of any other sound could be heard.

The short sword quietly cut away, travelling across the green stone wall, traversing without end, until finally returning to its starting position.

Upon the wall, a complete outline had been carved out, Chen Chang sheng looked at the outline, feeling that it was very familiar looking, he then remembered, the area outside of the Dallying Forest seemed to have the same appearance.

He pulled out the short sword and got slightly closer to the wall, he used the sharp tip to deeply penetrate and slightly widen the gap, and then carefully began to pull it outwards, constantly prying.

This location was the wall to the right of Wang Zhi Ce's portrait, following his motions, a whole block slowly came out from the wall at a hair-width's length at a time, all the way till a bulge that could be detected by the eye protruded from the wall.

After an unknown amount of time, the distance between the green stone that had been carved out and the green stone wall, was already around half a palm's width. Chen Chang Sheng returned his sword to its scabbard, then used both hands to hold the green stone's two opposing flat and smooth ends; taking a deep breath, his True Essence slowly dispersed to various points in his body, he then transferred his energy to the space between the wall.

An extremely low and faint sound of grinding could be heard, under the soft light of the Luminous Pearl, stone fragments flew up at a faster rate as an extremely uneven block of green stone was slowly pulled out from the wall by him.

The green stone wall had a hole cut out from it, deep within, a box could faintly be seen, the box was embedded within the wall, just from sight, it was clear that it would be hard to separate, but it should be possible to take off the lid from the box.

Within a place such as the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, there was actually this kind of contraption; to actually have such a mysterious box concealed. Whose handiwork was this back when the pavilion was constructed? Who had the ability to do this?

If this scene was to be seen by someone, it would definitely cause a large tremor within the Zhou Empire, perhaps even being traced back for hundreds of years, with some aristocratic clans experiencing trouble that can threaten their very existence.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't know as to who had placed the box within the pavilion. Back when the pavilion was being constructed, day and night, countless overseers kept check on the construction, how did that person manage to hide away from the gaze of countless others and in the end, Taizong Emperor's divine gaze – Chen Chang Sheng only knew that within the wall of the pavilion, there existed a box he required.

The colour of the box that was concealed within the wall was quite dark in colour, the outermost lid was easily taken off by him, revealing the real box that was within.

All that could be seen was that the top of the box had a lot of copper wires, between the wires there were a lot of intricate copper buttons, looking upon this, it looked extremely complex; it was at the centremost position, that the mechanism to open the box was located.

Even children within the Capital, upon seeing these copper buttons and wires, would be able to guess what they were; they were the most popular 9 chains puzzle (Chinese rings) in the Zhou Empire, only, they were multiple times more complex, actually seeming to be comprised of 17 sets of chains.

The 9 chains puzzle is the same as the labyrinth in the dallying forest, both were games used by Wang Zhi Ce all those years ago to whittle away the time and relax his mind while studying, but both were also extremely good for training the strength of divine sense and mathematics; only, 9 chains was often seen, but 17 chains was extremely uncommon, with the difficulty of solving it being also vastly different.

Chen Chang Sheng didn't have any hesitation, he stared at the extraordinary complex copper wires and began to calculate, his gaze constantly rested upon some copper button or other, he then started to move his hands to arrange the wires, his fingers constantly plucked amongst the wires, as if he was playing the qin (zither), constantly gathering the copper wires and buttons to one location.

This process took an extremely long time, until, after a long while, he saw a corner on the box's south western side become blank. He took a deep breath, his left hand's ring finger left the

copper wire, all that could heard was a light ringing; the wire that had been arranged by him began to automatically move, the pattern constantly unravelled and reformed, heading towards the centre.

This was the process of the puzzle being solved. Requiring a very long period of time before you would know if it was solved or not, there was also the possibility, that only in the end, would you find out that you had solved it incorrectly, at that point, you could only start over again.

Apart from waiting, there was nothing else to do, it was only then that Chen Chang Sheng noticed a lot of sweat had already appeared on his head, upon raising his arm to wipe it, he saw the previous sweat stains. He unwittingly felt a little startled, he gave a bitter laugh and shook his head, then took out a handkerchief from his sleeve and carefully wiped clean the sweat on his face.

Seeing the constantly shifting patterns, the copper wire and buttons, he remained quiet and wordless.

He didn't know as to whose handiwork this contraption was; was it Wang Zhi Ce or was it someone else? As for him knowing that there was a box within the green stone wall, he only knew of its existence, but didn't know why it existed.

Taoist Ji was the one that had informed him of all these details.

Before coming to the Capital, Chen Chang Sheng had always thought that his Master, Taoist Ji, was a regular Taoist; at the

most, someone that was skilled in medicine. Currently, after experiencing so many things, he naturally understood that his Master was definitely not a regular person, perhaps even having another persona.

Those few classical tomes and scrolls on The Way at the old temple at Xi Ning, were all works from before the great edits; in terms of the vastness of the collection, they could possibly be compared with that of Li Palace's. How could a regular person possibly collect so many dao scriptures?

He grasped the short sword and looked towards the portraits of past virtuous forebears on the walls, then shook his head. How could a regular person possibly know what kind of secret was being hidden within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist? Even just this short sword was extremely un-ordinary.

It was precisely because Taoist Ji had told him, if he wanted to go against heaven and change his fate, then he had to enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist and find the related secret. Therefore, upon arriving at the Capital from Xi Ning, his aim was to enter the pavilion.

His fate isn't good, wanting to live past the age of twenty, there are only two methods – either cultivating to the realm of Mysterious Divinity, or defying heaven and changing his fate. These two methods appeared extremely unreasonable, because they were basically impossible, but when compared with each other, the latter had a slightly better chance of success, because amongst the populace, there had always been a legend of going against heaven and changing one's fate.

How could one achieve defying heaven and changing fate? Firstly, you had to understand what fate is. He looked at the copper chain that was currently unravelling while quietly pondering; could it be, that his fate is stored within?

Chapter 192 - Once Upon A Time... There Were Three People (Part One)

What is fate? This word has countless meanings: being born rich or poor, special encounters, the course of life with its ever-changing trajectories and elusive fluctuations, or is it the mysterious, unknown will of the heavens?

If fate really was such an unknown, unchangeable existence, then this type of existence would be pointless. Naturally, cultivators would not accept such a conclusion. When the Heavenly Tomes descended, the people on the continent began to cultivate and borrow strength from the stars in order to change the course of nature. They would reflect on their own fate, face it with an utterly fearless spirit, and dare to change it.

Every cultivator's first connection with the world occurred on the night they determined their Fated Star. As a result, people's understanding of fate mirrored the vast sea of stars at night.

Since ancient times, the stars in the night sky would never change, regardless of position or brightness. They would forever shine serenely on the mortal world. Naturally, there was an infinite number of complicated connections between the countless stars, and they simply could not be drawn out on paper in their entirety. The images those connections formed were absolutely impossible to illustrate.

People would look up at the stars and see those beautiful and complicated images. They were so beautiful and complicated that their hearts would begin to palpitate. Quite naturally, they would

believe that these images concealed an extremely deep, everlasting meaning.

Countless years ago, the powerful members of the Orthodoxy's older generations vaguely perceived a sensation from the realm of celestial beings. They speculated that some sort of hidden power within the stars affected the fate of the whole continent.

As for the life of every individual, their Fated Star, the area surrounding it, and all of its connections were perhaps their individual fates.

—This kind of reasoning coincidentally agreed with the philosophy of fate within the Daoist Canon. It was also one of the most difficult explanations to understand: fate was the overview of trajectories concerning interactions between people.

The infinite stars could hold countless lives, hopes, and wishes. Even the corresponding explanation of fate, which people found so mysterious, could certainly also be found within the constellations.

It could be said that after a person was born, a corresponding explanation of their fate's trajectory would appear within the stars. It could also be said that even before a person was born his or her fate already existed within the stars, perhaps as a short line or as a grand constellation.

If cultivators wanted to change their own fate, they had to change those lines and images which outlined their fates. They had

to first change the brightness and position of their Fated Stars. If they truly could change the position and brightness of their Fated Stars to what they wanted, then the connections between the surrounding stars would change accordingly, affecting fates of other people at the same time.

Fate was never an independent existence. The people's fates were interlinked one with another, just as the the Daoist Canon explained: fate was the overview of trajectories concerning interaction between people.

However, in the past, the continent's countless astronomers had left behind records explaining that the stars, regardless of their position or brightness, had never changed at all. With all this, it was completely impossible to change one's fate by desiring to move one's Fated Star. Who had enough power to stand on earth and affect the heavens? Who could grab the stars from the mortal realm?

In the final book of the Pandect of Daoist Canon, the section regarding fate only had a total of approximately six hundred words. It only mentioned a few simple possibilities in the second paragraph, which included the cultivator being able to truly enter the Grand Liberation Realm or being capable of such an achievement. However, this Grand Liberation Realm was even more mysterious than the Concealed Spirit Realm. According to the legend, it only existed in people's imaginations. It was like a myth, so how could it be treated as truth?

Then, was there really anyone who had succeeded in changing their fate? According to the records within the Daoist Canon and

the statements of officials, such a thing had never occurred ever since the Heavenly Tomes had descended. Even if it had truly occurred before, no one was brave enough to publicly discuss it due to the lack of evidence and its excessively far-reaching effects.

As a matter of fact, there had always been a kind of reasoning or conjecture among the people saying that in the past thousand years, changing one's fate ought to have occurred three times.

Only those involved in changing one's fate had the power to expunge all records in the imperial observatory and various observatories. They had the power to cause the entire human world to steer clear of discussing this matter, in fear. This was because those involved in rising against and defying the heavens each of the three times were now all monarchs.

The three were Emperor Taizu, Emperor Taizong, and the..... Divine Empress of the Zhou Dynasty.

A thousand years ago, the previous empire had begun to show signs of corruption, and people lived on the edge of starvation. In the north, the Demon Race stared greedily at the empire, and in the south, several aristocratic families were rebelling. Countless armies arose, and wars were being fought continuously, destroying almost the entire landscape.

In the midst of the constant warring, countless experts surfaced throughout the continent, and even several great experts of the Saint Realm continuously appeared. This was also the first period of explosive growth the world of cultivation had experienced.

For a time, the flags on the gate of Luoyang changed countless times. One day a great general would dethrone the current emperor and kill his way into the eastern hills, and on the next day, a second young master of the Xiao Family in the south would suddenly change sides and call himself “Sima”. He would take the written admonition from Holy Maiden Peak and stage a coup d’etat with experts from various sects. Nobody knew who exactly it was that cleaned up that mess of a broken landscape in the end.

In that time, Taizu was a senior official of the Tianliang County. As he was related to the deposed emperor’s most beloved concubine, he was trusted and held in high regard, due to which he was ordered to guard the city. It could be said that he was very low-key or that he was very ordinary. However, in countless years he had never actually left the area of Tianliang County to go to Fork Mountain even by half a step.

In the eyes of the commoners, he was extremely mediocre and unambitious. When compared to those great lords who were in the spotlight at that time, he was standing in the dark, and truly nobody believed that he would be able to conquer the world. When discussing about who had power, nobody would even mention his name. People only believed that the Tianliang County had a decent geographical position, and that the clever sons of Taizu could protect themselves in this time of prominent emerging by bearing patiently and surrendering to the strongest force at that time.

However, who would have thought that after many years, the situation on the continent would change so suddenly? Great lords battled without rest, causing great losses and damage to every force. As Taizu built up strength in Tianliang County, he slowly

grew in power. One day, he led a great army of thirty thousand eastwards from Fork Mountain, and actually conquered seventeen cities in one breath. He formed alliances with many aristocratic families in the south and also received the full support of the Way. He actually achieved a great victory against the Rebels of Tiger Hill, which was renowned for its valiance outside of the city of Luoyang. He had successfully killed his way into the city. In the second year, he conquered the capital city and had officially taken the throne in front of the Mausoleum of Books. He had truly united the world.

Looking at this period of history when the Zhou Dynasty empire had been founded, there were many parts that could not be explained, and many things which could not happen according to reason. For example, the great lords could have taken a small glance at the Tianliang County in the beginning, and squash Taizu who was still weak at the time. In the first three bloody battles, when Taizu had arrived at Fork Mountain, just when the situation was about to take a turn for the worst, he would always be able to pull through and change misfortune into blessing. In the dozen or so uninterrupted, intense battles outside of the city of Luoyang, Taizu should have met his end, but he did not, as if there was some type of hidden power always protecting him.

If it was luck, then such great luck that would last for such a long time could only be called fate.

After Taizu had ascended to the throne in the capital, various sages led countless famous generals on expeditions everywhere. The various sects and aristocratic families in the south had all become his subjects, and those great lords who were unwilling to accept it had all been eliminated. For a while, all of the heroic

characters in the world were either being killed, captured, or sent to the capital. How could those experts resign themselves? They all cursed loudly without end on the execution grounds.

It was at that time that a legend began to spread. The reason why Emperor Taizu could tower over the experts of the world and kill his way to victory whilst seemingly being an ordinary person was that in the previous dozen or so years, he had focused on cultivation. In essence, he had formed an alliance with the leader of the Way at that time and had used some sort of secret technique to change his fate, thus changing his Fated Star into an Emperor's Star.

Chapter 193 - Once Upon A Time... There Were Three People (Part Two)

The second person suspected of successfully changing their fate was Emperor Taizong.

Emperor Taizong had many nicknames, such as the Millennial Wise Lord, the Great Lord of the Generation, etc. Throughout history, very few sovereign kings were as impressive as he was. His most famous accomplishment as Emperor and what garnered the highest praise from many citizens was naturally leading the human and demi-human allied army to victory against the formidable demons.

As time passed, people only remembered that the two races' allied army went on multiple northern expeditions under the command of Emperor Taizong along with the meticulous control of the Zhou Dynasty's government. They defeated the Demon race army and made them flee in all directions. Other than those who focused on studying history, very few people remained who still remembered when the Zhou Dynasty was founded.

When it was first founded, the emperor had begged like a dog for peace in front of the Demon race's vanguard and persevered whilst at death's door. As for the famous Treaty of Fallen Willow in people's memories, its meaning was already completely different from the original reason it was formed.

In the third year of Emperor Taizu's ascension to the throne in front of the Mausoleum of Books, the great Demon army flagrantly began to invade the south. At that time, the war in the central

plains had just ended, and most people lived in poverty. This resulted in a weakened country, which had no method of resisting. Emperor Taizu could only swear allegiance, become a subject, and pay tribute to the Demon race. Afterwards, as the strength of the Zhou Dynasty slowly rejuvenated, they attempted to spread their borders into the south. As a result, Taizu and his three sons led an army to war, only leaving behind Emperor Taizong who was still the Prince of Qi to guard the capital.

The demons took advantage of this and invaded the south again, conquering the Tianliang County in one fell swoop. The vanguard was about to attack Luoyang, threatening the whole human world. Emperor Taizong deceptively deployed his troops while he personally led the many generals and advisors from the Prince of Qi's Palace to meet the Demon Lord at the Fallen Willow Plains. It was rumored that the Demon Lord was surprised by how ordered and mighty the formations of troops were in or that Zhou Dufu silently appeared under five willows. Anyways, before the great war had even started, Emperor Taizong offered a large amount of wealth and resources, showing submission once again. By exchanging the pure white horn of a rhinoceros, the two signed a treaty, and the great Demon army returned to the north.

The Treaty of Fallen Willow was an underground alliance formed from humiliation.

In the history books, Emperor Taizong was known as a perfect man and was appointed according to his merit. However, he who was destined to become the great lord of the generation obviously had his own pride, so how could he forget this period of humiliating history? Three years after the event in the Hundred Herb Garden, Emperor Taizong, those legendary subjects, and the

divine generals finally began preparing to take back the Human race's honor and dignity from the Demon race. This was the catalyst for a grand scale war.

Under the governance of two wise lords, the Zhou Dynasty used all of its resources to strengthen itself. It just so happened that this coincided with the World of Cultivation's second renaissance. This renaissance was thousands of years old, and countless legendary figures like Wang Zhice appeared over and over. Adding to the alliance between Emperor Taizong and the demi-humans, they received strong support, which allowed the allied army to produce fantastic results for the first time in war.

In the following decades, the flames of war in the northern plains were never really put out. Emperor Taizong and the legendary experts constantly attacked the Demon race, and after three expeditions to the north, victory was finally decided between the two. The Demon race suffered a crushing defeat and returned to Xuelao City. They became afraid to take another step into the south.

There could be countless reasons for the Human race to defeat the Demon race: the lord was wise, the empire was strong, or experts appeared one after another as mentioned before. However, no matter how many reasons there were, it was very difficult to explain while looking closely at this period in history. The overwhelming Demon race had once ruled the entire northern region of the continent. So, how could they be defeated in just a few decades, and how could the positions of power between the two change so drastically? It seemed like there was a hidden power that protected both Emperor Taizu and the fate of the Zhou Dynasty, which constantly ate away at the morale of the Demon

race.

What exactly was this hidden power? Was it the power of fate? When Emperor Taizong changed his fate, did he also change the fate of the human world?

The third person who seemed to have successfully changed fate was still alive.

She was the ruler of the present day human world, the Divine Empress.

Maybe because she was still alive, very few rumors spread about the Divine Empress' success in changing fate. Very few people were brave enough to speak up about this matter, even if they were at home in their beds.

However, many people speculated in this manner.

How could a female conquer the world and sit on the throne of the emperor as the sovereign king? If the Divine Empress had not changed her fate, how could an event that had never happened before in all of history occur?

The legends described three people who seemed to have succeeded in revolting against the heavens and changing their fate. These three people were Taizu, Taizong, and the Divine Empress. They were also the three most successful people in the past thousand years of this continent. In Chen Changsheng's opinion,

there was no “seem” because before he had left the Old Temple of Xining Village, his master Daoist Ji had once explained very clearly, that only three people had succeeded in changing fate.

Although he had used the word “only”, nevertheless, he was certain of this history.

In order to change one’s fate, one had to change the position of one’s Fated Star in the night sky. Chen Changsheng’s reason for traveling to the capital and participating in the Grand Examination was to find a method of changing his Fated Star’s position by entering the Pavilion of Ascending Mist. This method should have been the technique the first Pope of the Orthodoxy and Emperor Taizu used in secret, which was the method Emperor Taizong and the Divine Empress should have also used.

What Chen Changsheng did not fully understand was that since it was the Orthodoxy’s secret technique, why did his master not tell him to find a way into the Li Palace to investigate? Rather, he told Chen Changsheng to do everything he could to enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist and arrive in front of the portrait of Wang Zhice. Still, no matter how legendary Wang Zhice was, he did not do anything related to revolting against the heavens and changing his fate.

Just at this moment, the blue stone walls produced a soft click.

Waking from his musings, he looked at the wall and saw that those complicated and unreadable bronze lines covering the box had already changed into a completely different image from before. The small, delicate bronze buttons had already shifted in

position, and after the two centermost springs retracted, the box unexpectedly opened.

The method to undo the seventeen pairs of chains was extremely complicated, and he did not even know whether it was correct or not until the end. However, he opened the box in a single attempt, which had to be considered very lucky.

He pulled out a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped away the sweat on his forehead. He licked his somewhat dry lips. While extending his hand towards the box, he suddenly realized that these bronze buttons and lines..... were actually the same as the stars and the invisible lines in-between in the night sky. However, they were just simplified.

It was just a casual thought, so he did not continue to ponder about it and extended his hand to take out the book within the box. The Pavilion of Ascending Mist blocked out all light and sound, and the book was kept within the blue stone wall. As a result, even after hundreds of years, it had only become slightly brittle around the edges, and the pages themselves were still pure white like new. The words looked as if they were just written.

The book did not have any words on its cover, so the first time Chen Changsheng saw words was on the first page. These words were not sharp, but rather rounded, like an old rock in the mountains. It was very distinctive.

‘The positions are relative.’

Seeing these four words, Chen Changsheng stared blankly at them. He did not understand their meaning at all. After thinking earnestly, he realized that there weren't any important clues, so he continued reading. The second page was densely covered with words. The handwriting was elegant but not frivolous, and it did not attempt to look clever at all. Only after seeing this page did he finally verify that this book was indeed the diary of Wang Zhice.

Chapter 194 – The Scholar Entering The Capital For His Imperial Examinations

‘Since I was young, my family was poor. I had a quiet and sincere but slow personality. I did not have any friends or family. I ate congee and vegetables, but I never ate meat. I only liked to read, and other than reading, there was still more reading. I lived without any serious ambitions, and after going to the capital, I really only wanted to enter the Heavenly Dao Academy to study. Afterwards, I met Chen’er, and I only wanted to read with her although she didn’t have any interest in reading at all.’

This was the first part of the opening paragraph in Wang Zhice’s diary. While reading this section, all of a sudden a familiar feeling took hold of Chen Changsheng, just like when he had learnt about Gou Hanshi’s experiences before the Ivy Festival. Although he knew they were opponents, Chen Changsheng still carried a sense of familiarity towards him, as he also only liked reading books.

‘On the way to the capital, I met the Grand Guard at that time, the future Taizu, in the Tianliang County Palace. Afterwards, I met the Prince of Qi for the first time and later met him again in Luoyang. There was also Elder Brother, yes, and I also met Chen’er in that alleyway dripping with filth, So, I stayed behind.’

‘The paper in Luoyang was expensive. Everything was expensive, and even the sesame seed cakes were more expensive than those from other areas. What made it even worse was the constant fighting day in and day out. After Chen’er used up all of our money, she wanted to return to her previous occupation. However, I always felt that killing people wasn’t good, so she asked me how

she could support our home. I thought over and over again that I still needed to enter the capital. Even if I could not enter the Heavenly Dao Academy, I could still camp outside the Mausoleum of Books to sell some [fake rubbings of inscriptions](#). I had always believed I was a useless scholar and could only write some nice words.'

'She came with me to the capital and was always by my side. Even if she wanted to leave, she couldn't, as Emperor Taizu's army had already surrounded the capital. It was also at that time when I learnt that Elder Brother had never prepared to come back after originally leaving Luoyang. On the day when the capital finally fell, Chen'er and I sat on a boat, separated from the Bridge of Lamentation. We saw the smiling Prince of Qi riding in on a white rhinoceros, and we knew that our lives would take a turn for the better.'

'As the Emperor ascended the throne in front of the Mausoleum of Books, the great Demon army had already arrived. After two years, the Demon race invaded again. The Prince of Qi would occasionally travel to the inn to search us out for idle gossip, and I could tell his mood worsened over time. I did not know whether it was because his favourite rhinoceros had died at the Fallen Willow Plains or that the Emperor had not decided who was the crown prince. One day, when he drank a little too much wine, he stared into my eyes and said that ever since he came to Luoyang, he had always wanted me to help him. I did not really understand this, as how could I, a physically weak scholar, help him with anything? Also, when I came to the capital..... all I wanted to do was enter the Heavenly Dao Academy to read.'

'After I entered the Heavenly Dao Academy and began studying, I lived the life I looked forward to living. Still, Chen'er did not like

such a plain life. I took her to see the green vines of Li Palace and the Banyan Trees inside the Orthodox Academy. She did not like any of that and said that the forest in the Garden of Dawn was too dense and the great banyan trees were too tall. The most important thing was, the River Qu and the lake within the Orthodox Academy were too flat. During some nights, I would watch the acrobatics in Luoyang and laugh, but she would only smile coldly. She said that reading and enjoying the scenery were boring, and only someone like me could withstand such a boring life. I understood what she wanted to say, but I did not want to follow up. So, I could only stay silent.'

'Afterwards, she still ended up leaving the capital. I did not know whether she went to Xuelao City or to find Elder Brother. However, in short, when she left me, I thought seriously for three days and three nights, confirming that I could not change anything. I continued to read, and while resting in-between, I began thinking of matters related to cultivation. My friends and I always thought that I did not have the potential to cultivate, much less any talent.

However, for some unknown reason, I, who had only begun cultivating after the age of forty, did not meet any problems in cultivation as rumored. I used the period of a single night to roughly master cultivation. Perhaps, the commotion I caused that night was a tad too marvelous since I scared a lot of people. As a result, I became a famous person in the capital for some odd reason, and the Prince of Qi took the imperial edict of Emperor Taizu to force me into a government position.

Many people believed I was proud because of the commotion I caused that night. Yet, the real reason I was pleased with myself

was because those small games which I made began to spread throughout the capital and even the whole continent. In short, I became famous and began establishing connections with various well known people, officials, and several princes including the Prince of Qi. They were on friendly terms with me, and my life seemed to become much more cheerful, other than the fact that she never returned.'

'Peaceful, happy days do not last forever. I understood this logic, but I just never thought that this lovely period would actually end so suddenly. On a certain day, late at night, two people came to my house. They were all the Palace of the Prince of Qi's guests, and they wanted me to do some things. After thinking for a moment, I did not agree, but I did not want to get in the Prince of Qi's way. I understood his temperament; nobody could prevent him from taking a step forwards.

On the morning of the second day, horse carts began carrying corpses outside of the city, and I stood atop the building, looking in the direction towards the Hundred Herb Garden. I watched the white smoke slowly rise up and silently prayed that not too many people would die, at least those princes whom I knew. Pity, it did not end up as I had wished. Those princes still died in the end, including their wives, sons, and daughters.'

'I sat at home in boredom for three days. I did not leave the house, nor did I look for any related news. I looked silently at the two guests from the Palace of the Prince of Qi. Finally, after handling the matters outside, the Prince of Qi came to me personally. In such a nervous hour, he actually took the time, especially, to come and see me. I did not know whether I should have felt honored or suspicious.

The Prince of Qi said that he did not mind my silence the past few days, but he needed me to show my own opinion towards this matter for the capital's populace to see. I could only stay silent. He stared into my eyes and asked what my feelings about this matter actually were. I thought a little and said that I had no opinion. As a result, it was he who had become silent, before turning around and leaving. That was the last time he and I spoke to each other as friends. Since only afterwards, did I learn that he had already formally ascended the throne that morning, becoming the Zhou Dynasty's emperor.'

'My position in the government was not taken away, nor was I put under house arrest, much less being sent to jail. I was just purposefully forgotten by the government and those people I was once familiar with. I was forgotten in this house on Grievance Alley. There was also another person who was purposely forgotten like me, Emperor Taizu. Perhaps, the Prince of Qi..... no, I should say the emperor.....wanted to be a good son to his father as he was worried that Emperor Taizu might cause some trouble behind closed doors from being too bored, or perhaps he still remembered the friendship between us that I too might cause trouble at home from boredom. Anyway, he decreed that I would hold the secretary position and accompany Taizu in the royal palace.'

'I must say, this period of time living deep within the palace was actually very interesting. In the short period of a few months, Taizu seemed to grow older by several hundred years and transformed into a real old man. Unlike how he had been easily angered in the past, he became much kinder and no longer cared about the matters of the empire. Of course, he had no way of caring since nobody allowed him to have any influence.

As a result, he began paying attention to the victories while playing games and those beautiful female servants. As for the latter, I admonished him many times, but he did not really like to listen. Regarding the former, it was very hard for him to win against me while playing games, and instead it became more and more interesting. In that tall palace covered in vines and on that table underneath the vine canopy, we played many rounds of cards. While we were leisurely playing, we would always talk. As a result, I heard many stories, which I never forgot.'

While looking at the handwriting in the diary, Chen Changsheng found it difficult to remain calm.

All these were stories of Wang Zhice himself, which included memories of a legend. What he said was very messy, but very concise, and it clearly narrated the course of his own life. This narration just happened to coincide with the continent's most turbulent times. As a result, this story naturally and strongly influenced Cheng Changsheng.

While reading the words in the diary, it was as if he had seen Wang Zhice in those days. He was a young scholar who went to the capital for exams and not for a position in the government. He traveled thousands of miles just to read tens of thousands of books. Who would have ever guessed that on such a journey, the scholar would see an upside down female shadow in the city of Luoyang, causing him to stop in his steps and see a lot more things.

The young scholar began walking once again in the end, reaching his destination of the capital. He had never forgotten his original

purpose all those years ago, but he could not live by his way of thinking from all those years ago. Many things had changed from his perspective. The upside down female shadow had broken apart into nothingness. He became part of the government and famous in the capital. Afterwards, he was forced into those worlds, which he had never liked nor ever wanted to enter.

After reading up to this point, Chen Changsheng slowly became more nervous. Up until now, Wang Zhice's diary or oral history, was about to enter the most important part and the section Chen Changsheng wanted to know most. In the period of time that Taizu was put under house arrest deep within the palace, what exactly did he say to Wang Zhice? Maybe he could discover an explanation from a person who had changed fate himself.

He continued to read the diary.

‘There were many rumors regarding Emperor Taizu, and the one most well known was naturally of him changing fate. Specifically, a rumor always spread around the continent saying, that many years ago, Taizu became friends with the leader of the Way at that time, who was also the previous Pope of the Li Palace later on. He used some type of secret technique to successfully change fate by giving offerings to the starry sky. This caused that Emperor's Star to forever shine on the world from the night sky.

As for after the transformation of Hundred Herb Garden, a lot more specific details about an offering to the starry skies appeared in the rumors. Everyone was saying that in order to change fate, Taizu had to be willing to leave behind only a single son to carry on the bloodline. As for the other sons, they would all be offered to

the starry sky..... however, after Taizu successfully ascended the throne, he did not want to stick to the promise he had made all those years ago. In actuality, all of his sons were so outstanding, so who could he allow to die? Who was willing to die?’

‘I did not know whether the Prince of Qi and the other princes had heard of this rumor or not. Even if they had heard it before, nobody would have believed it. However, it didn’t matter if this rumor was true or false. As long as it appeared and as long as they had heard it, the dry branches within their hearts would transform into scary, poisonous snakes, constantly biting at their hearts. From taking down Luoyang to the capital, Taizu’s outstanding sons could never maintain a good relationship, mainly due to who the throne belonged to.

Thinking back now, this rumor affected these relationships greatly. I must admit, Taizu’s sons were all very outstanding, but His Majesty was the strongest one. When those princes were still scheming to affect Taizu’s choice and waiting for fate’s arrangements, His Majesty was the first one to take action. Without the slightest hesitation, he slaughtered all of his brothers.....’

‘I asked Emperor Taizu if there really was something like changing fate. That day, he was drunk, and the age spots on his face were especially obvious. He smiled just like a child and also like a fox. He did not answer my question directly. He only sang dramas from the Tianshui State while forming dimples with his smile. He nodded his head without stopping, as if he was just about to fall asleep but struggling to keep himself awake.’

Chapter 195 - There Is No Such Thing As Fate

‘Now that I think about it, His Majesty was a really extraordinary person. He arrived in front of Fate with a cold-blooded and formidable attitude. He did not accept Fate’s arrangement; rather, he began to decide the Fate of others. He did not wait for Taizu to choose him; rather, he chose instead and killed everyone, leaving Taizu with only one son. Therefore, the emperor’s throne or the bloody fate changing rumor didn’t matter anymore, and there was no need for any more discussion. Regardless, both the Zhou Dynasty and entire human world needed this kind of extremely effective decision. In the past, his cavalymen suffered greatly under the hands of the Demon race during the battles within Tianliang County. After that, he suffered a disastrous defeat by the hands of Elder Brother in Luoyang City. However, regarding everything that had happened, both the Demon Lord and Elder Brother were weaker than him. He was indeed the most powerful man of this era, so the world fell into his hands. This did not exceed my expectations. Of course, too many things had happened during this process, so as a result, I really could not feel happy for him.’

‘What happened next did not exceed my expectations either. His Majesty began to work diligently in politics, and he devoted his heart to ruling the country. As a result, the continent slowly became peaceful, and the power of the Zhou Dynasty flourished greatly with each passing day. His Majesty Taizu finally grew impatient with playing games and the beautiful female servants. After closing both of his eyes, he returned to the stars, and perhaps, too much time had already passed. His Majesty did not permit me to continue staying in the palace, so he let me teach at the Star Seizer Academy. I could also read as I taught, so I did not object and was very grateful. Furthermore, I understood the real

reason why His Majesty had sent me to Star Seizer Academy because the days of the northern expeditions against the Demon race were not far away.'

'After that night in the Hundred Herb Garden, His Majesty and I were no longer friends. Although there were many things I was unwilling to do, I was willing to participate in fighting against the Demon race. His Majesty wanted to wash off all shame from the Treaty of Fallen Willow, so every lord, subject, soldier, and citizen worked diligently. In just a few years, the preparations for the northern expeditions were complete, and His Majesty directly made me a vice-commander. This stirred up a large amount of gossip in the government. Fatty Cheng was the angriest. Everybody knew each other, and they felt I could only strategize on paper. I had never actually led any soldiers, so how could I hold such an important position?'

'I did not try to explain myself at all. I understood very clearly why His Majesty wanted me to become the vice-commander. This wasn't only to take advantage of what I had prepared in those few years at the Star Seizer Academy, but to also force me to decide my future. Perhaps, I would die on the battlefield against the Demon race, or I would drift far away from the battlefield to find her or Elder Brother. However, I remained because the matter of conflict with the Demon race lasted more than one or two years. Since I had decided this, whether I died or left, I had to help the human world resolve the threat of the Demon race before doing so.'

'Very fortunately, we were victorious.'

After reading this part of the diary, Chen Changsheng breathed

in deeply. Although he was only interested in the secrets of changing fate, he still could not help but be filled with emotion when he read the renowned general's story in that great war against the Demon race. Wang Zhice had downplayed that one simple sentence, yet he did not know how much blood had been spilt nor how difficult it was.

Very fortunately, humanity was victorious in the end.

‘To the victor go the spoils. His Majesty decided to build the Pavilion of Ascending Mist and hang all of the people's portraits who had performed meritorious services inside. I knew that my own portrait would certainly be hung inside. However, it felt extremely weird because I always felt that hanging portraits was like honoring the dead. This was something that should only be done after one had died.’

While reading this part that Wang Zhice had written, he unconsciously looked around. Borrowing the light from the Luminous Pearl, he looked at the several dozens of portraits belonging to those worthy subjects and renowned generals. A familiar feeling blossomed in his heart, and the people within the portraits seemed to stare at him silently in the soft light. Chills ran down his spine.

‘After the Pavilion of Ascending Mist was built, Daoist Wu began to help draw portraits of us. Not long after, Zhang Sun died, the Duke of Zheng died, and the Duke of Wei also died..... All of those people who had their portraits hanging in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist slowly passed away. It was also at that time when a rumor began to spread between us old men. It said that in the

beginning, His Majesty was the same as his father. In order to have victory over the Demon race, he worked together with the Orthodoxy to make an offering to the stars, and he succeeded in changing fate in the end. As for the offering that His Majesty had given to the starry sky, it was the souls of the twenty four great subjects and generals within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.'

'It was a wet day filled with autumn rain on the sixth day after Du Ruyu was buried. Daoist Wu came out of the imperial palace and met us in secret. The saint of painting in Luoyang City who was originally full of high spirit already had a head full of white hair, and his eyes were filled with fear. He told us that once the portraits of the twenty four people were completed, he would also die. I knew that he had heard of the rumor of His Highness defying fate and had guessed something. I did not say anything and came up with a plan to secretly send him out of the capital. It was said that he arrived in Jialan Temple. The reason why I did not say anything was because I did not believe in anything like changing fate, including the nods from Emperor Taizu when he was drunk in the palace or what he had said before he had died. I thought this was all a lie of the old man who was unwilling to step out of the limelight, scheming to regain his own authority and powers, and wanting to give the journey of his life an even more mysterious feel.'

'I really began to think about the word Fate. I began to think whether Emperor Taizu and His Majesty had really used some secret technique to change Fate through an offering to the starry sky. That had occurred several months later when Qin Zhong was already bedridden from his old injuries. I went outside for a rare opportunity to meet him, and I just happened to see Daoist Ji who was ordered to treat him by an imperial edict. Seeing Daoist Ji's expression, I finally confirmed that this matter was questionable.'

While reading this paragraph and holding the diary, Chen Changsheng's hands slightly trembled.

Up until now, Wang Zhice's storytelling finally began to tackle the heart of the matter. However, Chen Changsheng did not react so severely because of this, but rather the diary had mentioned too many names of legendary figures, for example, that Elder Brother. He should have been Zhou Dufu who had defeated Emperor Taizong in a single battle at Luoyang. And now, his master's name was actually mentioned.

‘When I was writing this down, seventeen of the twenty four honored subjects from the Pavilion of Ascending Mist had already died, and it was almost my turn. During this period, I followed His Majesty's wishes. I never took up a position in the government, but I only taught at the Star Seizer Academy. If I wanted to investigate these matters, it was a tad difficult, so I could only ask Qin Zhong directly before he had died. I believed that even if the emperor had used his loyal subordinates' lives as an offering to the stars, he could not hide it from Qin Zhong. As I had expected, not only did Qin Zhong know, but Yu Gong and a few other people also knew of this matter.’

‘That night, I looked at Qin Zhong who seemed countless times older than he actually was, and he stayed silent for a very long time. I did not understand why he still calmly accepted it even though he knew and even though His Majesty had told him the truth beforehand. Qin Zhong told me His Majesty, the emperor, had served him many times and saved him several times. So to give his life for His Majesty was the right and natural thing to do.’

‘There were many people like Qin Zhong and Yu Gong, who willingly sacrificed themselves to His Majesty’s plans for world domination, but I was not included. I was unwilling.’

‘The Lord wanted his subject to die, but the subject did not want to die.’

‘His Majesty was suspicious of me for many years, but I only had the utmost loyalty towards his Majesty.’

‘What Qin Zhong had said that night before he died was correct. I had never corrected my own position, and I had never treated His Majesty as my own lord. I was still that young, perverted scholar who had forgotten why I set out on my journey. I still believed that His Majesty was that young, unrestrained prince from before, and I still believed he was my friend.’

‘The most important thing was that I could die for many things. Even when His Majesty’s life was in jeopardy, I was willing to sacrifice myself. To be victorious over the Demon race and to have the country maintain peace for tens of thousands of years, I was willing to die. In fact, when I was originally in the fields of snow, I almost died countless times, but I was unwilling to die as a sacrifice to the stars.’

‘It was because I did not believe in such a thing.’

‘I did not believe in changing Fate.’

‘For Taizu to found the Zhou Dynasty, to take down Luoyang and the capital in succession, and to ascend the throne in front of the Mausoleum of Books, it was not because he had really offered the lives of his sons to the stars nor established his own Emperor Star. Rather he was extremely lucky to have such outstanding sons. Under some indescribable pressure, these outstanding sons contended with one another, and they all burst forth with dazzling radiance on the stage of Tianliang County and then the stage of the whole continent. The Prince of Qi was an even more outstanding son among them, and he endured patiently with ferocity. The overall situation made him seem strong or even perfect. Without these sons, how could the Chen family of the Tianliang County obtain the glory of today?’

TL Note: Where did the Chen family come out of you wonder? Taizu and Taizong are a part of the Chen family, the same family that revolted and the one Chen Liuwang is a part of. Basically, the previous emperor (and husband of the Divine Empress) was the son of Taizong, who passed away leading to a power struggle with the Divine Empress and the Chen family over the throne.

‘As for this thing called Fate, it could not be further from the guesses of the common people who did not know any inside information. Taizu led a great army of thirty thousand eastwards through Fork Mountain and conquered seventeen cities in a row. The last three battles were the bloodiest, as well as the most dangerous, but he had never relied on Fate to escape the jaws of death. Instead, the Prince of Chu and the Prince of Qi borrowed three thousand wolfriders from the Demon race. As for breaking through the encirclement at Luoyong, he used a secret method to trick his enemies and commoners, but he could not trick his closest subjects. The night when Elder Brother killed a massive number of

people in the city of Luoyang, maybe other people did not know, but how could I not know?’

‘The reason why humans could defeat the Demon race was because of the country’s strength, the wise lord, the preparations, everybody pooling together their efforts and wisdom, the alliance with the Fae, the tens of thousands of citizens devoting their lives to battle in the northern blizzards for six years straight, and finally because the Demon race suffered from internal disorder. In order to suppress the groups of rebels, the wolfriders suffered heavy casualties. How did this have anything to do with changing fate? As for the twenty four lauded subjects being offered to the stars? Their deaths were indeed questionable, but to me, it was just an approach of His Majesty to unite them through joys and sorrows as their lord. They just died together.’

On the very last page of the diary, Wang Zhice wrote in this way.

‘In the beginning, the human world lacked paths. The paths only formed underneath our feet while we walked. They depended on how we walked and how we chose our position.’

“Our position was relative. If I viewed the lord as lord, then I was his subject. If I did not view anybody as lord, then I was not a subject.”

“Therefore, there is no such thing as Fate, but only choices.”

Chapter 196 – The Eight Storms Of The Cardinal Directions Rising From The Black Rock

No, naturally there was no way of changing it.

If there was no such thing as fate, then naturally there would not be anything like revolting against the heavens or changing fate.

Chen Changsheng stared at the final part of the diary, and he stayed silent for a long time. It was hard for him to put his feelings into words, as he felt relieved, but even more disappointed. Wang Zhice's words were like thunder, rumbling loudly in his sea of consciousness. However, it was a pity that it was not thunder from spring, and it had no way of causing springtime rain that moistened the ground. It was more like an alarm ringing, causing him to wake up from his fabricated hope.

This part was really powerful, but for him, it did not have any meaning at all——no, there should be more than just this diary. Chen Changsheng's willpower had developed from the past several years of resisting life and death circumstances; therefore, he did not spend much time to calm down. He was determined that this was not everything the night had to offer in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist.

When the Pavilion of Ascending Mist had first been built, his master Daoist Ji had already become an important figure within the capital. When those honored subjects were heavily ill and about to die, his master had helped treat them, so he naturally

knew even more secrets. Having him enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist through countless hardships definitely was not just to read what Wang Zhice had written.

He shoved the diary he had finished reading into the hilt of the short sword. He looked at that box on the green stone wall, and he looked at the indescribable bronze wires and densely packed buttons. The more he looked, the more he felt that the image of the box seemed to be extremely similar to the vast sea of stars in the night sky. He was not mesmerized by this sight, so he stretched out his hand to pick up the box. He also put it into the sword hilt.

The diary and box were not small, and no matter how you looked at it, it seemed impossible to shove them into the sword hilt. However, it was exactly in such a manner that he forcibly shoved them in. It was like a huge tree with a circumference of one chi being swallowed by quicksand or a mountain being sucked into another world through a black hole. Under the soft glow of the Luminous Pearl, this scene looked somewhat strange.

After finishing these two tasks, he reached into the green stone wall with his hand and carefully felt around the box. As expected, he found a black rock after a short while.

This black rock was about the length of half a finger, and it was slightly tenuous. Just by looking at it, he could discern its hardness, and his fingertips verified this feeling while touching it.

Chen Changsheng sat in the corner and raised the black rock in front of the Luminous Pearl. He examined it closely—if this black rock could be hidden away together with the diary by Wang Zhice

in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, it was definitely not an ordinary object.

The surface of the black rock was smooth and bore the likeness of fog. The surface lacked any cracks, and it was entirely pitch-black like ink. However, it was even more like the sea on a starless night. There was clearly nothing on the surface of the black rock to look at, but he stared at it for a long time. It was as if there were undulations of ink-like waves, producing countless different shades of black.

Chen Changsheng's gaze landed on the black rock which was like a black sea.

The black sea was the night sky.

His consciousness arrived within the night sky.

The night sky, which was originally pitch-black, suddenly began to glow with countless stars.

At this moment, he looked just like that night when he determined his Fated Star. He had entered a unique selfless state of nothingness, willfully floating in the night sky and freely flying through the stars. After an indeterminate amount of time, he saw that a small, red star had appeared in an area extremely far away in the night sky.

Chen Changsheng serenely gazed at that star, feeling extremely

comfortable, as if that star was his Fated Star.

The star was peaceful and healthy, overflowing with life, constantly spreading pure and bright rays of light, and not like it was about to be extinguished at all.

He suddenly realized something.

Even if he really was going to die in five years, that star would yet continue to shine.

This fact gave him some comfort, but afterwards, it caused him even more disappointment and grief.

In the surrounding space of this red star, there were countless other stars.

He stared at those stars and realized that those stars which hung in the night sky also stared coldly and peacefully back at him. In other words, they were staring at that small red star that belonged to him.

He suddenly began to feel disturbed, and an extremely strong feeling of fear grew within him. It was just like when he had seen those portraits within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist. He always felt that the people within the portraits stared back at him.

Those people were already dead, but it seemed as if they were still alive.

These stars could not speak, but they seemed to want to tell him something.

His consciousness did not know that his body was still currently within the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, sitting with his back up against the green stone wall. He was extremely stiff, just like a sculpture.

The black rock he held between his two fingers suddenly became extremely bright, emitting countless rays of light and heat. Those rays could not penetrate the doors and windows, and only his body could feel the heat.

Chen Changsheng who was inside the Pavilion of Ascending Mist began sweating nonstop. The sweat was instantly vaporized, and it became a cloud of white mist wrapped around his body in the end.

The cloud of white mist also carried a type of indescribable, bizarre smell, which was luckily trapped by the edges of the mist, not letting a single bit out.

An indescribable, fantastic aura arose from deep within the black rock, and it entered his body along his fingertips. It passed through his ethereal palace (heart), finally landing in his sea of consciousness.

A loud sound rumbled in Chen Changsheng's sea of consciousness. It gave him a different feeling than the one he had experienced previously after he had finished reading Wang Zhice's

diary. This rumble of thunder was even more like real thunder.

Countless stormy waves arose in his sea of consciousness, as if it was about to rip open the ethereal opening.

While leaning against the green stone wall, his eyes flickered nonstop, moving faster and faster, and he also began to sweat more and more. The white mist surrounding him also grew denser and denser to the point of even covering up his face.

Deep within this white mist, his eyes were tightly shut, but they still trembled at a high speed. After the springtime thunder had rumbled through his sea of consciousness, countless images appeared.

He was inside a grand church that had light everywhere. Countless churchmen all knelt on the ground, and there were hundreds of sculptures on both sides of the church, which seemed very modest under the light.

Deep within the wave-like light, an elderly person with divine robes and a divine crown tightly grasped his divine staff. He prayed loudly towards the multitude of stars in the sky above the church, and a slightly plump, middle-aged male knelt in front of the divine throne. After the ceremony of offerings continued, a projection of starlight fell onto him. At the same time, an abnormally majestic aura returned to the starry sky from his body.

There were changes in the deepest parts of the starry sky. These changes were so small, that some stars had become slightly darker,

as if the wings of a moth had just blocked part of the sun. Other stars moved slightly from their positions, even if they only moved by a sliver of hair. Even the oldest stargazing platform would have encountered extreme difficulty to detect these changes. Even the Council of Divine Ordinance could not.

In the night sky, stars moved, darkened, or paled. The countless, tiny changes combined at one spot, and the formless structure of power also experienced some change. The centermost star was faint purple, and it slowly began to glow brighter. Its glow became denser and more beautiful until its purple had reached the extreme. Afterwards, an extremely bright light suddenly burst forth.

It was in such a manner that the Purple Abstruse Emperor Star had appeared. In the mortal realm, the armies of Tianliang State had left the Fork Mountain from the east, taking down seventeen cities in one breath. They seiged Luoyang and seized the mausoleum of the capital, where Emperor Taizu was formally enthroned.

Years later, horrifying sounds of killing arose in the Hundred Herb Garden, and the quiet night was broken. Those stars which once had changed in position and brightness slowly began to darken. Blood flowed like a river, and brothers killed each other. In the end, out of all of those outstanding sons of Emperor Taizu, only one person survived.

Many years later, after a game of cards and after fooling around with many beautiful female servants, Emperor Taizu arrived under the vine canopy, and stared at those stars in the night sky. His face

revealed a painful smile.

That Purple Abstruse Star in the night sky continued to dazzle people's eyes. However, it already no longer belonged to him, but to his son, the famous Prince of Qi known for his filial piety. He was also the current Emperor Taizong.

The galaxies continued to experience change, occupying the twenty-four constellations of region of Central Wilderness. It seemed like it was about to expend all of the energy it had gathered since the ancient times in a few short decades.

The brightness of the twenty-four constellations were so dazzling that people did not even realize the Purple Abstruse Emperor Star, which had been surrounded by these constellations, had already begun to change its position. Although it had only moved by a sliver from the ground's perspective, it actually had already shifted north. It directly approached the darkness of the night sky.

As the great Demon army suffered a crushing defeat and returned north, the human world became peaceful. The Pavilion of Ascending Mist was built in the capital, and a skinny painter lay on the ground, painting nonstop. The expression on his face seemed a little deranged.

Emperor Taizong's most beloved and revered queen had passed away from sickness, and the queen's brother, the honored subject who had the first portrait in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, Duke of Zhao, committed suicide on the sovereign's orders. However, in the history books, he died for the same reason as his sister, the most commonly seen disease of River Luo. Closely afterwards, the

only person in the world who was brave enough to argue with Emperor Taizong, the Duke of Zheng, also passed away from an illness. Qin Zhong and Yu Guan who were the most loyal to Emperor Taizong also passed away from an unknown reason. However, they died very peacefully, and it could even be said happily, without a single complaint.

The Zhou Dynasty flourished, but these famous subjects and divine generals instead began to wither away slowly.

During a particular late autumn, after participating in the funeral of a fellow subject, he walked silently into the imperial palace and arrived at the Pavilion of Ascending Mist. He looked at the portraits on the wall, and finally arrived in front of his own portrait. He stared silently at himself within the painting. It was as if he was participating in his own funeral in advance, and he had even laughed and said the words “As if you were still alive”.

He hid a box into the green stone wall beside the portrait before turning around and leaving.

The Wang Zhice in the painting watched as Wang Zhice walked out of the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, smiling without saying a word.

Chen Changsheng opened his eyes and woke up again. In that moment, the cloud of mist that had always surrounded him suddenly dispersed. It was as if it had just collapsed. It landed on his body at a speed, which could not be seen clearly with the naked eye. It passed through his academy uniform and entered his body through the pores of his skin.

The mist originally was his sweat, so after it returned to his body at this moment, it had transformed into a watery substance. It formed countless small streams within his body, moistening the dried up river valley from the Grand Examination. Afterwards, it dropped into the deep, final chasm of the broken mountain range without a sound to be heard.

The skies of the snowy plains where he had overheated in the fight against Gou Hanshi began to snow. The snow was like goose feathers, fluttering about lightly and gracefully. It seemed to be slow, but extremely fast at the same time, causing the entire wasteland to once again become a vast expanse of whiteness.

Afterwards, the Eight Storms of Cardinal Directions rushed in from all sides, perhaps horizontally, perhaps vertically, or perhaps from the ground underneath. They produced a very slight pitter-patter, striking the lake water that floated in midair. It was an incomparably magnificent sight.

Chapter 197 – Unexpected Apathy

After an unknown amount of time, Chen Changsheng woke up. However, he felt very refreshed, and while looking internally with meditative introspection, he realized that all of the injuries he had received from the Grand Examination were already healed. Still, he looked at the black rock within his palm and stayed silent for a very long time. He did not feel overjoyed at all.

He vaguely understood that this black rock was what he was looking for. Other than the diary of Wang Zhice, the black rock was the main reason why Daoist Ji had him enter the Pavilion of Ascending Mist. According to what Wang Zhice had said, Emperor Taizu may have given him this black rock before the emperor's death. Perhaps, it was extremely vital to the secret of changing fate.

The black rock was very important; however, he could not stop thinking about Wang Zhice's diary.

After experiencing that springtime thunder, countless storms of wind and rain arose within his sea of consciousness. He saw many images, and he was able to understand many things by cross-referencing Wang Zhice's records. However, he still could not come to a decision.

Changing fate required one to change the position or brightness of one's Fated Star. Thus, changing the person's position and role within the mortal world, and so.... the positions were related.

If it was impossible to change the brightness or position of one's Fated Star, then to change the brightness or positions of the surrounding stars could also create a similar effect. The logic was the same. If you wanted to change your fate, you had to first change the fate of other people in your life. The closer the relationship between you and these people, the greater the change in fate you would experience.

Such as father and son.

Such as brothers.

Such as a lord and his subjects.

This truth was very cold and harsh.

Chen Changsheng could not confirm whether the images he had seen were illusions or truly history. For the whole night, his body had been drenched in sweat before being dried off. As a result, he felt very cold when he woke up.

If those bloody, yet cold images were indeed the true face of history, then were the two great lords of Zhou really such cold-blooded people? Was it really worth it to pay such a large price like performing terrifying acts to change fate? Immediately afterwards, he thought of the Divine Empress. If she was the third person who succeeded in changing fate, then how great of a price did she pay?

Were those bloody and cruel rumors that had long been

circulated among the people true? Was her firstborn son from all those years ago really poisoned to death by the previous queen's assassins or was he truly killed by the Divine Empress herself according to the rumors? Most of her children had never lived past the age of six. Was it really because the imperial palace's environment was too dangerous at that time, or were the children some type of offering? Were they an offering to the stars?

Chen Changsheng's body grew colder and colder. He did not want to continue thinking out of fear of where it would lead him. He could stay calm even in the face of death, but he, a fifteen-year-old, was still too afraid to approach these truths that had been hidden from the light too closely. He wanted to leave this place.

The Pavilion of Ascending Mist was still pitch-black like before. He was unable to see any light from the doors or windows, so as a result, he could not confirm the time. However, he knew from experience that it was already five o'clock, the time he woke up everyday.

He stood up and repaired the green stone wall. The Pavilion of Ascending Mist was a forbidden location deep within the palace, and it only opened up at most two or three times a year. With such sporadic openings, the slit in the wall that his short sword had created should not become discovered. Also, he really did not have any energy to care about this matter.

Logically, the Pavilion of Ascending Mist could block out all light and sound. However, in the next moment, a clear, distant ringing chimed from below, as if a person was hurrying over from far away to wake up the people in tranquil contemplation within the

pavilion.

A soft wind blew as the chiming stopped, and the Pavilion of Ascending Mist's large door slowly opened. The soft morning sunlight landed on the green stone floor and on the dozen or so paintings on the walls. Those people within the paintings once did countless good deeds for the Zhou Dynasty, but now, they could only see sunlight a few times a year.

Chen Changsheng walked out of the Pavilion of Ascending Mist with the soft wind and morning sun. He walked with the sounds of chimes; however, he could not calm his heart. Even as the soft wind entered his bosom, he could not become clear-headed and instead felt even colder.

Standing on the high platform in front of the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, he glanced at the morning sun, which had just risen above the horizon. Then, he looked over at the capital, which was being slowly awakened by the morning sun. The countless streets and alleyways seemed to be like the lines of a chessboard, and the countless rivers and water canals seemed like wires, which had been dropped on the board. The countless markets were like an infinite amount of squares, and countless people lived inside the countless residences located within these squares.

To change his own fate by changing the fate of others; could such a thing really be done? Even if those streets and alleyways became decadent...even if those residences fell into ruins...even if millions of people became homeless...even if there were endless wars and major floods....Did he still have to do it?

He remembered the last sentence in Wang Zhice's diary again——There is no such thing as Fate, but only choices.

Yes, the experts of the world were split into two types: one who changed the fate of others to perfect their own fate, and others who completely disregarded fate, firmly believing that one could control everything connected to oneself. Even if fate proved itself stronger in the end, the latter would still hold their head high.

The father and son, Emperor Taizu and Emperor Taizong were the former, and Wang Zhice was the latter. What about him? Currently, he was still very weak, but if he became strong in the future and had to face this choice, what would he choose?

Looking at the streets and countless residences of the capital under the morning sun, Chen Changsheng questioned himself: What type of person should I be? What was more important: a complete life or a complete life?

TL: That's what the author wrote. Just keep reading and it might resolve itself.

The two 'complete's and the two 'life's within the question had two totally different meanings.

Thinking of this question, he left the Pavilion of Ascending Mist. He walked down along the extremely long stone steps, and even when he had set foot on the ground of the imperial palace, he still did not have an answer.

Most of the people within the capital were still asleep, but most of the people within the imperial palace had already awoken. Some examinees were very sleepy with dark circles forming around their eyes. They had obviously not slept very well. Other examinees had not even slept a wink that night due to being so nervous, but most of the examinees were well-rested.

As for those young examinees who had come from various academies and sects, the most important goal of the Grand Examination was to enter the top three grades. Thus, they could obtain the right to enter the Mausoleum of Books and view the monoliths. They naturally made proper preparations and needed to guarantee nothing would affect them like becoming unfocused as they viewed the monoliths.

The several dozen stagecoaches formed a group outside the palace waiting to be called. The unusually spirited horses were treading softly but impatiently. The examinees stood next to the stagecoaches and were waiting to set off. After watching Chen Changsheng who was slowly walking from the palace, some people also began to grow impatient, such as the young scholars from Scholartree Manor.

The examinees noticed that Chen Changsheng's hair was somewhat messy, and his expression was exhausted like he was very sleepy. It even looked somewhat haggard. Knowing that he definitely did not rest well spending the night in the Pavilion of Ascending Mist, perhaps maybe not even sleeping at all, they could not help but feel somewhat puzzled. They thought to themselves, even if you could only meditate in there for one night, you did not have to make this that hard on yourself.

Tang Thirty-Six was able to discern something more. Somewhat worried, he asked softly: “What happened?”

“It’s fine.” Chen Changsheng shook his head and replied.

He would not tell anyone about the experience he went through last night—even if it was Tang Thirty-Six or even Luoluo——He had walked into learning history’s cruel truth. Although discovering the secret was still in the far off distance, he had already seen the door or perhaps even obtained the key.

Regardless if it was the examinee’s or official’s attention, both were on Chen Changsheng’s body.

The news of finding the Garden of Zhou had already been publicly announced, or it was more accurate to say that it had been announced in the court’s upper echelon and various academies and sects. Last night, the royal court was celebrating with a feast, and Lady Mo Yu who represented the Empress formally announced that the Garden of Zhou would be opened following a month’s time.

Who did not want to enter the Garden of Zhou? Who would not want an opportunity to obtain the inheritance of the continent’s strongest expert? However, only cultivators who had reached the ethereal opening could enter the Garden of Zhou.

In regards to cultivation, viewing the monoliths inside the Mausoleum of Books, so that one could comprehend the Way was the most important. Now, it had become their last opportunity for

the examinees to enter the Garden of Zhou. They had to make a breakthrough within one month and achieve their ethereal opening.

Under this dual pressure, the examinees were naturally very nervous. They knew they had to work extremely hard, even to the point where they would risk their lives inside the Mausoleum of Books. While thinking of this, Chen Changsheng's gaze naturally became a bit perplexed.

Chen Changsheng had only just turned fifteen years old, and apart from a very small number of people like Qi Jian and Ye Xiaolian, he was younger than a majority of the Grand Examination's examinees at the three ranks. However, he was currently the same as Gou Hanshi and Tianhai Shengxue and had already achieved ethereal opening. In other words, even if he did not travel an inch forwards in the Mausoleum of Books, he could still easily enter the Garden of Zhou a month later.

Thinking carefully, to achieve his ethereal opening at such an age, and even directly surpassing the Proclamation of Azure Clouds, he was already on some level that exceeded Xu Yourong. How could people not envy him? If it were not for Qiushan Jun's performance on the matters relating to the Garden of Zhou to be overly dazzling, perhaps people would have felt Chen Changsheng's performance was even more shocking.

The current Chen Changsheng was, without a doubt, the focus of the entire capital. However, he did not have this kind of self-awareness. Instead, he just sat silently next to the vehicle's window and stared at the streets illuminated by the morning light.

He was silent and appeared somewhat absent-minded.

Seeing Chen Changshang's absent-minded state, Tang Thirty-Six said with his brows raised, "Indeed, I don't know what kind of situations you've encountered. You don't seem to need good luck from the Mausoleum of Books anymore as you can already directly enter the Garden of Zhou, but you need to get something straight. To us cultivators, the Mausoleum of Books is a matter of the utmost importance, even more important than the Grand Examination, the Garden of Zhou, or anything else."

Chen Changsheng did not reply and continued to stare out the window.

Tang Thirty-Six continued to say, "You cannot necessarily see the immediate benefits of what you obtain from the Mausoleum of Books. Also, how far and to what extent we reach will still depend on how much of the Mausoleum of Books we comprehend. Countless people in the past have already long since proved this, and there have been no exceptions."

Chen Changsheng understood what Tang Thirty-Six meant. Of course he knew how important the Mausoleum of Books was to cultivators. The issue was that he currently had insurmountable problems with his mindset.

Cultivating was obviously extremely important. If one reached the Concealed Spirit Realm, one could repeatedly replenish one's meridians without ever needing to worry about the haunting shadow of death. If one managed to cultivate to the Grand Liberation Realm, a stretch of one's hand was enough to pluck the

stars. One could dictate one's own fate and even become immortal, much less worry about other things.

The problem was that in the past, even Zhou Dufu could not even come in contact with the Concealed Spirit Realm spoken of in the legends, so how could he? As for his current ability, he had already placed first in the Grand Examination's first rank and had begun to touch the secret of altering fate. Since he could not reach the Concealed Spirit Realm, was there still any point in him cultivating any more? He who had always been disciplined and hardworking suddenly began to grow lazy for some reason, even to the point where he thought living seemed pointless.

The morning sunlight was gradually flourishing, and the fifteen-year-old Chen Changsheng had suddenly lost all interest in cultivation. At that exact moment, he arrived at the only holy ground in any cultivator's mind: the Mausoleum of Books.

Chapter 198 – Mausoleum Of Books

There was a river south of the capital and on the north side of the river, there was a straight path. Looking southwards from the the riverbank, a large, verdant and lush park could be seen. Deep within the garden, a green mountain was hidden. This green mountain was the legendary Mausoleum of Books—the stagecoaches stopped on the road, and the examinees peered through the curtains. They looked at that green mountain and revealed an expression of yearning.

During the first few days when Chen Changsheng had arrived at the capital, he had always stayed at the Plum Garden Inn, just outside of the Mausoleum of Books. Many times, he had observed the Mausoleum of Books from far away, so he was not as excited as the examinees, especially those peers from the south. The inn only had one room remaining.

The Green Vines of Li Palace, the Bridge of Lamentation, and the Mausoleum of Books were all well-renowned places in the capital, and the Mausoleum of Books was where all the tourists wanted to visit. It was also very lively like the Li Palace, and there were stalls lining both sides of the path on the riverbank. The stall keepers yelled constantly, and it was already crowded although it was still early in the morning. On the main streets slightly north, many offices of government officials could be seen, as well as the offices of many various academies and sects.

The stagecoaches did not stop on the street for too long. Under the direction of the officials and priests, they crossed a wide wooden bridge above the river, and they arrived at the green park outside of the Mausoleum of Books. They also did not stop here for

too long, but instead they directly traveled down the path leading towards the tombs between the ancient and lush cypress trees. Under the one hundred and eight statues of virtuous people's gazes from the older generations, they continued traveling towards the green mountain.

There were already many tourists in the Mausoleum of Books' outer park, and many citizens of the capital were taking a stroll. They currently watched as the coaches traveled directly towards the Mausoleum of Books. They could quickly guess the identities of the people within the coaches, and they knew that they must have been the examinees of the top three grades. They could not help but reveal an envious expression.

The ancient trees obstructed the morning sun and formed shadows, making it seem extremely quiet and beautiful. The deeper they went, the quieter it became. And in the end, they could only hear the sound of the faintly green rocks grinding against each other under the wheels on the path leading to the tombs.

A stone gate was at the end of the dim path leading towards the tombs. The stagecoaches stopped in front of the stone gate, and the officials and priests walked out in front of the gate, carrying official required documents. They were responsible for the affairs regarding viewing the tombs in the Mausoleum of Books. They began speaking with the soldiers guarding the Mausoleum of Books, and the students all exited the coaches one by one, lining up and waiting for entry.

Not long after, the stone gate slowly opened, and the examinees could feel slight tremors from the ground. They could not help but

be very startled. They wondered to themselves how this heavy, unimpressive gate was able to cause the ground to tremble. They also thought about what type of magic formation could open such a heavy gate.

With a low rumble, the heavy stone gate stopped moving, and the entire green mountain appeared in front of everybody's gaze.

Thus, the Mausoleum of Books appeared in front of everybody.

A mausoleum normally referred to a tomb, but only the tombs of emperors or saints had the right to be called mausoleums.

The Mausoleum of Books indeed was like a tomb. The mausoleum was very clear cut and square, and it was overgrown with countless green trees. So it seemed like a green mountain. Due to those dense green trees, the examinees could not see those legendary stone monoliths and did not know where the Heavenly Tomes were hidden. However, they knew that the Heavenly Tomes were inside. So for just a moment, the path became abnormally silent, and everybody's faces revealed a devoted expression.

As for Chen Changsheng, his current state of mind was wrought with a few problems. His thoughts were in a mess, and he had a difficult time calming down. He truly was not excited like the first time he had entered the city and seen the green mountain from far away in the inn. However, he still felt an indescribable reverent feeling as he actually arrived in front of the Mausoleum for the first time. He looked at those green trees around the Mausoleum of Books and stayed very silent.

The capital was always the center of the continent.

It didn't matter which dynasty fell. When the flames of war raged on without stopping or when the time was filled with national peace and order, the capital was always the center. Those various sects and aristocratic families of the south also believed this. Even the Fae race in the White Emperor City and the people on the Great Western Continent agreed. The reason why the main altar of the Orthodoxy was here, as well as the Li Palace, was because the Mausoleum of Books was here.

TL: The book only mentions that there are five continents in the world. The Great Western Continent is not one of the five. It is mentioned later on in the book that the Great Western Continent was originally part of the Eastern Continent and split off later. That's why you still have humans cultivating, which the Heavenly Tomes brought to the world.

Countless tens of thousands of years ago, the Heavenly Tomes descended in rolling flames from beyond, which the heavens had bestowed upon the lands. From that day onwards, the Heavenly Tomes awakened the intelligence of humans, which allowed them to learn how to use fire, how to create and use tools, and how to tie knots to record history. They invented the written language, and because they had invented the written language, it allowed them even to begin studying the mysteries of nature. This caused them to begin questioning their place in the world. They began to look up at the starry skies, began to guide Starlight for purification, and officially stepped onto the road of cultivation. This green mountain was the original source for all of this and everything else.

What was the [Mausoleum of Books](#)? Mausoleum did not mean “tomb” here, but rather it meant “flat”.

TL: The Mausoleum of Books (???) can also be known as a mound (?). In this case, it says ‘flat’ (?) is referring to a rather planar, flat and level mound.

When the Heavenly Tones emerged, all of the directions “flattened”. The Mausoleum of Books was where the Heavenly Tones were, and the center of the world was where the Mausoleum of Books were. The Orthodoxy could only originate from the capital where the human empire was founded. As a result, the southern religious sects fought with the northerners for many years. They were actually self-governing, but they still had to acknowledge the Zhou Dynasty as the main country due to this principle.

During the waiting period, the silent park slowly became noisy. Many tourists and citizens of the capital followed the stagecoaches here. If it was an ordinary day, they could not even approach the Mausoleum of Books at all before being stopped by the guards. However, as today was a special circumstance, they had the opportunity to approach the Mausoleum of Books’ front gate. Their faces were full of envy while looking at those youngsters who were preparing to enter the mausoleum.

The tourists and citizens could freely enter or leave the Mausoleum of Books’ outer park, but they could not enter the mausoleum itself at all.

Many years before, it was said that the mausoleum was open to

the public, so anybody could enter, explore, and sit down in front of those stone monoliths. It would be overcrowded and overburdened everyday as the green mountain was flooded with people. Several thousand years ago, there was once an emperor who wanted to control the world by controlling the rights to enter the Mausoleum of Books. He had issued an imperial edict that only people who obeyed him could enter the mausoleum. Such an action offended all of the various sects, schools, and academies of the continent, and this emperor was very quickly overthrown by the anger of everyone in the world. Afterwards, the entire continent had reached a conclusion that the Heavenly Tomes from the celestial beings were objects to be shared, and nobody would be able to monopolize it.

Although it had never been said that the mausoleum's stone monoliths were damaged, there was a different perspective, so the experts of the continent decided to set some rules for entering and leaving the Mausoleum of Books. In the previous dynasty's era, only cultivators who had received special permission could obtain the opportunity to enter the mausoleum. However, this condition was extremely vague. After the Zhou Dynasty was founded, the rules for entering the Mausoleum of Books were simplified and was rumored to be strengthened. Only the examinees who had passed the Grand Examination or people who had great merit could be allowed to enter. As an alliance was formed with the Fae race to fight the demon race, the Fae race and the people of Great Xi also gained similar rights—the so called rules were actually just a compromise. Of course, since the Mausoleum of Books resided within the Zhou Dynasty's capital, people who lived there naturally held advantages. Those various sects and aristocratic families from the south all raised this issue, so there were always many complaints.

The priests and officials led the young examinees to the area outside of the stone gate, and they remained there as they did not have the right to enter the Mausoleum of Books. After checking the examinees' identities, they let them enter in a proper order. The ground once again began to rumble with a clear, loud sound, and as some people turned around to look, they only saw the stone gate slowly closing again.

After a deep rumble, the Mausoleum of Books and the outside world were separated once again.

Forty odd, young students looked at the Mausoleum of Books before them, and they all carried different expressions. Some were very nervous, and some were very excited. Some were very silent, and others were burning with eagerness. However, everybody had their eyes wide open—at this moment, they had arrived in front of the Mausoleum of Books. However, they still could not see the true appearance of the mausoleum properly as there were just too many green trees. This view of the trees had blocked too many other sights.

Just at this moment, several white robed males appeared in front of them. Many of them carried an indifferent expression, and their eyes did not reveal any specific attitudes either. They spoke with a very calm voice, and they spoke very slow, just as if they lacked the opportunity to speak on a normal basis. Looking at them, Chen Changsheng very naturally thought of that Wolf Tribe's teenager, Zhexiu.

Tang Thirty-Six said: "These people are the legendary Monolith Guardians."

Chen Changsheng asked: “Monolith Guardians?”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “Just like those Monolith Comprehenders from the southern Holy Maiden Peak, they aim to understand the secret of the Heavenly Tomes their whole lives. They have even sworn a blood oath to never leave the Mausoleum of Books even beyond a single step.

Chen Changsheng was a little surprised. He thought that spending one’s entire life in the Mausoleum of Books was just a little too lonely and plain. He then looked into the eyes of those white robed males and naturally began to feel a little sympathetic.

Tang Thirty-Six saw the expression of his face and sneered slightly: “They are perfectly happy to offer their lives to the Mausoleum of Books, so why would they still need your sympathy? Also, who knows how many cultivators in the world would rather be like them and have the opportunity to view the Heavenly Tomes whenever they wanted. They are beyond enviable.”

Chen Changsheng still could not understand. He liked to read books and explore the true meaning of the Daoist Canons, but was life not supposed to have freedom and joy? How could they devote almost all of it to this green mountain?

Perhaps, because they spent most of their time studying within the Mausoleum of Books and were not good at communicating with people, the several Monolith Guardians only muttered a few words. They explained the facilities around the Mausoleum of

Books to the young students before preparing to turn around and leave. However, one Monolith Guardian thought of something and said: “Don’t forget, the Garden of Zhou opens in one month.”

After these explanations, the several Monolith Guardians left in a swift manner.

There was a period of silence. The young examinees were speechless at what had just happened. They were all at a loss for what to do.

That was it? What should they do next?

“Just don’t forget that the Garden of Zhou opens in one month.”

Guan Feibai said to those disciples of the southern sects indifferently, before stepping away quickly, and he followed Gou Hanshi towards the green mountain.

The four disciples of the Mount Li Sword Sect were the first ones to leave, and the examinees separated slowly, treating them as examples. In the beginning, those examinees still walked at a steady pace. Occasionally, a few of them hurried along, which was normal, but once people entered the wooded mountain, immediately there were countless loud sounds. They had actually used motion techniques.

After hearing the sounds echo from the green mountain, Chen Changsheng was confused and asked, “Why is everyone in such a

hurry?”

“Didn’t you hear what Guan Feibai said just now? The Garden of Zhou will open in a month. If they wanted to enter the Garden of Zhou, they had to break through to the Ethereal Opening Realm. Every slow step was a delayed step. If they viewed the stone monoliths a little later than others, it could delay them by several dozens of years on the path of cultivation in the future. Obviously, everyone is using all their energy to be first.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him, and said: “Rather, you are the one who is weird. Why aren’t you hurrying?”

Chapter 199 – Mausoleum Guardian

Chen Changsheng did not know how to respond. Did he have to tell him that he had just suddenly lost all interest in cultivation? After thinking for a moment, he said, “I have already undergone my Ethereal Opening, so I obviously don’t need to hurry too much.”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him and asked, “Are you being cocky?”

Chen Changsheng was slightly startled and said, “I really did not mean it that way.”

Tang Thirty-Six pointed towards the woods and said, “I mentioned this on the way over here. To us cultivators, the Mausoleum of Books itself is already a very important matter, and it is infinitely more important than the Garden of Zhou. Only those who are short-sighted and can only see a few inches ahead will treat the viewing and comprehension of the Mausoleum of Books as a condition to undergo Ethereal Opening. Look at Gou Hanshi; he may have already undergone his Ethereal Opening, but he has not wasted any time at all.”

Chen Changsheng looked at where he had pointed and only saw afterimages of shadows on the mountain path in the green woods. The loud sounds continued, and the shadows of the four people from the Mount Li Sword Sect quickly disappeared.

He turned around, looked at Tang Thirty-Six, and asked: “Aren’t you also standing here?”

“I felt that you were acting a little strange today, so I decided to follow you.” Tang Thirty-Six said as he stared into Chen Changsheng’s eyes.

Chen Changsheng looked at him and spoke earnestly, “This is a rare opportunity, so don’t waste time.”

Tang Thirty-Six said, “There is still at least another month, so there is no need to hurry.”

Just at this moment, a voice appeared behind the two and interjected, “Indeed, there is no need to hurry.”

The person who had arrived was Su Moyu. This young priest from the Li Palace College had really encountered some bad luck in this year’s Grand Examination. He had met Zhexiu who was an extremely strong opponent in the first round. Luckily, his performance on the written examination had been extremely outstanding, so he just managed to squeeze into a third rank placement from the final decision.

While staring at him, Tang Thirty-Six was confused and asked, “Chen Changsheng did not hurry today because he had some problems with his head, and I am looking out for him. What are you doing here?”

Su Moyu said, “There is a saying among the people that you cannot eat hot tofu if you are impatient. The monoliths of the mausoleum are not this easily understood. The most important

thing is your mentality, so the more hurried you are, the easier it is for you to encounter problems.”

Tang Thirty-Six reminded him by saying, “The Garden of Zhou will open in a month. Time will not wait for people.”

Su Moyu replied calmly, “I do not plan to enter the Garden of Zhou.”

Tang Thirty-Six’s expression changed slightly, and Chen Changsheng also felt a bit puzzled. Who was not interested in Zhou Dufu’s legacy?

Su Moyu reassured them, “Only after The Grand Examination did I learn that my foundation was a little fragile. It’s ridiculous thinking about how arrogant I was before, and I plan on staying in the Mausoleum of Books for a bit longer.”

Chen Changsheng asked: “We can stay for as long as we want in the Mausoleum of Books?”

Su Moyu’s expression changed slightly: “Didn’t you hear what the monolith guardians had said before?”

Chen Changsheng felt a little embarrassed and replied: “Oh, I was thinking about other things before.”

Tang Thirty-Six felt that this kind of response was a little humiliating and rushed in to speak, “The rules for viewing the

monoliths in the Mausoleum of Books has not changed these past few years. As long as you are able to enter the mausoleum, you can stay for as long as you want. However, if you want to enter the mausoleum again thereafter, it is not an easy matter.”

Chen Changsheng looked at Su Moyu and asked, “You have decided to give up the Garden of Zhou for the Mausoleum of Books?”

Su Moyu said, “The Garden of Zhou may be good, but it is not where I want to be.”

From time to time, the green wooded mountain would echo with sounds of startled birds flapping.

Tang Thirty-Six said, “It is very obvious that those other people do not think the same way.”

“How can the Garden of Zhou be compared with the Mausoleum of Books? Even if it really contained Zhou Dufu’s legacy, it can’t be more important than those stone monoliths on the mountain. The former is a short cut, whereas the latter is the proper way.”

Su Moyu looked at the green mountain silently and explained with a sorrowful sigh.

Chen Changsheng stayed silent and did not say anything.

Tang Thirty-Six laughed at him and said, “How are there so

many explanations that seem right but are actually wrong? A straight line between two points is the shortest; therefore, the most correct path is itself the fastest route.”

The correct path was the fastest? Chen Changsheng and Su Moyu both stared blankly after what was just said, and they realized that they actually could not refute these words at all.

“Not bad.” Chen Changsheng looked at him and praised him.

“I just can’t win against you, so I will leave first.” Su Moyu shook his head and walked towards the Mausoleum of Books with his hands behind his back.

“I worry for Su Moyu’s future.” Tang Thirty-Six slightly raised a brow and stared at his back as the young priest slowly disappeared into the green woods. He said, “There are many examples in the past and in the present where many people are still stuck in the Mausoleum of Books unable to leave. Hopefully, he will not end up like them.”

Chen Changsheng was a little surprised and asked, “Being stuck in the Mausoleum of Books?”

“They are unwilling to leave until the end when they become too scared to leave. They can spend several dozens of years viewing the mausoleum’s monoliths in one sitting. How is this any different from being a prisoner?”

Tang Thirty-Six said, “Those people can’t bear to part with the outside developed world and are unwilling to swear a blood oath to become a Monolith Guardian. They are also are unwilling to part with the good fortune offered by the stone monoliths of the Heavenly Tomes. To leave or to stay are both great temptations. and facing up against these temptations, how they choose, and when they make their choices are all tests the Mausoleum of Books gives to everybody.”

Chen Changsheng said, “I do not consider this choice that difficult to make.”

“That is because we still have not yet seen the Heavenly Tomes.”

Tang Thirty-Six looked at him and said, “Of course, even if you see them, I believe you have the power to clearly recognize what you want most, just like Gou Hanshi. He must have already made up his mind beforehand. If you are unable to pass even this obstacle, then how can you still have to right to continue along the path of cultivation.”

Chen Changsheng suddenly thought of something and asked, “If I can stay in the Mausoleum of Books and view the monoliths, then are there meals provided?”

After hearing these words, Tang Thirty-Six was somewhat speechless. He thought ‘you aren’t a foodie like Xuanyuan’ and answered in an upset manner, “Of course there is food. If you can view the monoliths until your death, then you can also eat until your death.”

Chen Changsheng was a little embarrassed and said, “Don’t get mad. I just thought this matter was relatively important.”

Tang Thirty-Six was too lazy to acknowledge his words and said while pointing to the mountain full of green trees, “The Mausoleum of Books only has one path, and those stone monoliths are all beside it. Only once you have finished viewing one level can you move onto the next.”

Chen Changsheng asked: “How many levels does the Mausoleum of Books have?”

He had always been perplexed by this question. According to common practice, the Three Thousand Daoist Canons had several descriptions of the Mausoleum of Books, but he had never read how many levels the mausoleum had after all.

“I don’t know..... oh, to be exact, nobody knows how many levels there are in the Mausoleum of Books.” Tang Thirty-Six answered.

After hearing what was said, Chen Changsheng was very puzzled and replied: “According to what I know, although reaching the top of the Mausoleum of Books is extremely hard, there are still people who have accomplished it. How can the amount of levels be unknown?”

Tang Thirty-Six said: “My grandfather once told me that on the day you really enter the Mausoleum of Books, you will understand

why there are no set number of levels.”

“Why is that?” Chen Changsheng was still puzzled.

Tang Thirty-Six stared into his eyes, and said deeply: “Firstly, I am not a Monolith Guardian. And secondly, I am not a tour guide, so can you not ask me so many questions? All you need to know anyway is that those stone monoliths can only be viewed one by one. In the end, how many monoliths you comprehend will depend on your own power of understanding.”

Chen Changsheng could feel that Tang Thirty-Six’s mood had worsened. He originally wanted to control himself and stop asking questions, but he really could not hold back his curiosity. He tentatively asked Tang Thirty-Six: “One last question?”

Tang Thirty-Six took a deep breath and said: “Speak.”

Chen Changsheng began speaking, “According to the Daoist Canons, the Divine Empress and the Pope will both reach the top of the Mausoleum of Books by the Divine Path. Is this the path you mentioned?”

“No.” Tang Thirty-Six said: “The Divine Path is a different path.”

“But you said earlier that the Mausoleum of Books only has one path.”

“That is only for the people who come into the Mausoleum of

Books to view and comprehend the monoliths.”

“If you want to go to the top, which path is closer? I feel that the Divine Path is closer.”

“The Divine Path is the true path south of the mountain, and it is not a shortcut to climbing the mausoleum. You are not that type of person who fears difficulties, so you should know very clearly that there are no shortcuts to the mountain. It can only be scaled with hard work.”

“But you just said to Su Moyu that the shortcut is the correct path.”

Tang Thirty-Six stayed silent for a very long time before saying, “Firstly, I was arguing with him. And secondly, whether it is the correct path or the shortcut, you cannot take that path directly to reach the top of the Mausoleum of Books anyway. You don’t need to ask me anymore, so let me tell you directly. It is because that Divine Path has a person guarding it, and there has never been anybody who has successfully ascended the mausoleum by force.”

“Don’t get mad.” Chen Changsheng was a little embarrassed and extended his arm to pat Tang Thirty-Six’s shoulder.

Tang Thirty-Six stared into his eyes and said, “This is the second time. Don’t make it a third.”

Chen Changsheng knew that Tang Thirty-Six’s current mood had

already reached the limit before exploding into rage. He did not want to continue annoying him, so he said, “I’ll just stroll around casually.”

At this time, all of the examinees in the top three grades of the Imperial Examination had already entered the Mausoleum of Books and disappeared into the green woods. Only the two of them remained outside.

Tang Thirty-Six’s voice became slightly higher and asked, “Are you really going to stroll around casually?”

Chen Changsheng nodded and replied matter of factly, “The scenery within the mausoleum gardens is not bad. I want to walk around and take a look.”

Tang Thirty-Six stared at him like he was staring at an idiot. Only after trials and tribulations did everyone finally enter the top three grades of the Imperial Exam. They had obtained the opportunity to enter the mausoleum for viewing and comprehending the monoliths. Yet, Chen Changsheng did not want to seek knowledge silently in front of those stone monoliths, but he actually wanted to casually view the scenery? Did he really think he was a tourist? Tourists could not enter the Mausoleum of Books.

Cheng Changsheng ignored how surprised and mad Tang Thirty-Six was and abandoned him where he was. He began to leisurely stroll around the Mausoleum of Books. The greenness of the Mausoleum of Books in early spring was gratifying, and the vegetation in the gardens under the mausoleum were many and

varied. The scenery was indeed good. He walked, stopped within it, and placed his two hands behind him as he viewed the scenery. He looked extraordinarily like a tourist from the countryside.

Due to the dense green tree cover, it was very difficult for the people outside the Mausoleum of Books to see what the inside of the mausoleum looked like. However, people within the mausoleum could see the people outside very clearly. Many of those examinees who had traveled along the mountain path noticed his presence and discovered that he actually did not ascend the mausoleum. Instead, he went sightseeing outside. They could not help but feel very shocked.

Chen Changsheng had unexpectedly not climbed the mausoleum. Obviously, everyone was shocked. Afterwards, various different feelings blossomed within different people. Some students thought that he was being purposefully indifferent. This caused people to truly despise him to the utmost, such as the Scholartree Manor's students and the junior called Ye Xiaolian from Holy Maiden Peak. Some people thought that with his current strength and the strength he had shown during the Grand Examination, he did not enter due to being too strict on himself. This was despite the Mausoleum of Books being right in front of him. For example, Guan Feibai and Liang Banhu thought as such. Gou Hanshi received the water Qi Jian passed to him and drank a sip. He saw Chen Changsheng sitting on the edge of a pond, staring blankly. Instead, he had a different line of thinking compared to most other people.

He felt that Chen Changsheng had a few problems, which were probably problems on a psychological level. However, he did not understand why he was like that. It had only been a few days since

the battle at the Grand Examination. He had seen Chen Changsheng's willpower and determination, which could even be considered as terrifying. However, such a great change would not occur in just a few days.

The Mausoleum of Books was a green mountain with a very large surface area. If you had wanted to complete a lap around it by following the path below the mausoleum, you would face a difficult endeavor, especially for Chen Changsheng who was walking and stopping every so often. He would stop for a moment to look at the vegetation and then stare blankly at the pool. He walked and thought about matters that may or may not exist, and only after walking for four hours, did he arrive south of the mausoleum.

Chen Changsheng currently looked at the pattern on the road formed by the colorful rocks, and he suddenly heard the sound of rushing water from above. He subconsciously raised his head to look, and he just saw a silver waterfall, flowing out from a certain place in the rock face. This rock face was several dozens of zhang above, and the waterfall formed a white chain as it hit the rock face. From there, the water split off in all directions, forming several dozens of even smaller streams of water. They flowed through the rugged rocks and finally landed on the ground.

After seeing such a beautiful image, Chen Changsheng's first reaction was that the Mausoleum of Books' southern face was really very steep. There were not many trees, but how could he not see even a single stone monolith? Afterwards, his gaze followed those several dozen streams of water downwards. He only saw an extremely wide and large, black rock forming a plateau in front of him. On that plateau, there were man-made, shallow canals, which

caused the water from the Mausoleum of Books to flow towards those canals.

While following the canals with his eyes, he only saw that the water was unbelievably clear inside with the white rocks at the bottom of the canals shining brightly like pearls. Not long after, he arrived in the due south area of the Mausoleum of Books. The sound of the waterfall slowly disappeared, and the canals on the plateau grew even closer together. He could not help but think that if he looked down from the top of the mausoleum, then what type of image would these shallow canals form?

Afterwards, he saw the legendary Divine Path.

It was an extremely straight path, which led directly from the plateau to the top of the Mausoleum of Books. Just like Tang Thirty-Six had said, if you wanted to climb the Mausoleum of Books, then this Divine Path was the shortest path. However, this path was forbidden for everybody, except for the Divine Empress and the Pope when they performed a grand ceremony of offerings to the heavens.

There was nothing at all on the Divine Path, not even any trees on either side. Only cliffs surrounded the path.

Any person who considered the Mausoleum of Books' zenith at the end of this Divine Path would probably have a strong desire blossom within them to walk up the path.

However, nobody had ever succeeded before.

It was because at the beginning of this Divine Path, in between the countless canals of water, there was a pavilion.

A person sat within the pavilion.

That person was clad with worn-out armor, and there were marks of rust on the front part of the chestplate. The armor completely covered up his body from head to toe and did not reveal anything at all.

That person carried a worn-out sword in his hand. The edge of the sword was covered with many dents, and its tip rested on the ground.

The man fully clad in armor seemed like a sculpture from afar.

Sometimes, people would even suspect whether there was a person inside the armor at all.

However, Chen Changsheng knew that the figure was a person.

The whole continent knew this person.

This person had already sat in the pavilion for several hundreds of years.

Many people were saying that if this person had not sat in

boredom at the Mausoleum of Books for hundreds of years, perhaps, he would have already become a member of the Eight Storms of the Cardinal Directions.

This was because hundreds of years ago, he was already the continent's number one divine general.

He was this generation's mausoleum guardian, Han Qing.

Chapter 200 – Tourist

His whole body was clad with old armor, which was covered in dust. He had sat there guarding the mausoleum for hundreds of years.

Chen Changsheng looked at the pavilion from far away and looked at that legendary divine general. He stayed silent.

From time to time, the mountain wind would cause the water from the waterfall to drift into the pavilion, landing on the worn-out armor. The water could not wash off the dust on the armor, but instead it made the armor dirty faster. The person within the armor did not move, and he sat on the rock with his head down. He leaned on his sword as if he was sleeping.

In the past hundreds of years, the number one divine general of the continent, Han Qing had always held the mausoleum guard position. Without a question, it was an extremely great honor. However, no matter if it was storming or snowing, he would guard the mausoleum day and night. He would guard all the way until he became a part of the Mausoleum of Books itself. How lonely was such a lifestyle?

Seeing such a scene, Chen Changsheng very naturally thought up of Jin Yulu. After the gate of the Orthodox Academy was destroyed, Jin Yulu always sat on that bamboo chair, even though it was just an academy gate. However, when compared with this legendary divine general in the pavilion, only their sitting position was different. Afterwards, he thought of that huge war hundreds of years ago, and thought that perhaps Jin Yulu and this person

really did know each other.

He did not leave, nor did he walk up. In between a dozen or so of the shallow canals, he stared quietly at the pavilion, and stayed silent for a long time. After all, he was still a fifteen year-old teenager, and only felt deeply moved occasionally. The complicated feelings in his heart did not last for too long, and instead felt more respect and surprise.

After an unknown amount of time, he bowed towards the pavilion before turning around and leaving. He continued to walk around the Mausoleum of Books.

The scenery within the Education Palace was actually even more beautiful than the scenery within the Mausoleum of Books, but that kind of beauty always had a fake feeling from being cut off from the rest of the world. Or perhaps it was because those azure skies and pure white clouds were too perfect. So after looking at them for a long time, it was very easy to tire of it, which urged people to keep far away from it.

Luoluo stood on the edge of the hall's highest railing and looked at those silky, wispy clouds far away. Her pretty face revealed an expression of slight annoyance and said, "Why can't I go to the Mausoleum of Books?"

Chen Changsheng and Tang Thirty-Six had both entered the Mausoleum of Books. After leaving the royal palace, Jin Yulu had arrived at the Education Palace to see her. After hearing what she had said, he replied in a distressed manner, "Princess, you obviously can enter the Mausoleum of Books. You can go whenever

you want, but not now, because you..... don't have a result for the Grand Examination?"

"Then, why can Zhexiu go in?" Luoluo turned around, and asked.

"Wofu Zhexiu is only a loner." Jin Yulu looked at her and said with a serious expression, "The Zhou Dynasty focuses mainly on war merit, so ever since the Empress visited the Star Seizer Academy, everybody has been nice to him. However, he is still a loner. People will not be overly cautious with him, but they will also not overly focus their attention on him."

"I hope Master can help that pitiful child." Luoluo spoke slightly pitifully. She was even slightly younger than Zhexiu, but as the princess of the Fae race, all the Fae teenagers were children in her eyes. Also, she sympathized with him very deeply because of Zhexiu's bloodline. She really hoped Chen Changsheng could help him.

Jin Yulu sighed and began saying, "Wofu Zhexiu's problem is much harder to deal with than yours. If it weren't for its difficulty, perhaps your mother would have already sent people to take him back to White Emperor City. How could she let him wander the snowy plains for all these years and rely on killing separate members of the Demon race to survive?"

Luoluo knew what Jin Yulu had spoken was the truth. She sighed gently and turned around to ask, "I can't enter the Mausoleum of Books, but what about the Garden of Zhou?"

Only those who had reached the Ethereal Opening Realm could enter the Garden of Zhou. However, she believed that she could break through within a month, even though she did not enter the Mausoleum of Books to view the monoliths.

“Even if princess is able to break through, His Majesty would definitely not allow you to enter the Garden of Zhou.”

Jin Yulu said, “Even if His Majesty gave you permission, the two Saints within the capital would not risk it.”

On the stone steps in front of the Education Board, officials and clergymen were bustling around without stopping. Some were going up, and some were coming down. They seemed like ants that were foraging in all directions. Currently, the sky had already darkened slightly, and the light of the setting sun reached the stone steps. This caused their shadows to elongate drastically. It was as if there was a fire on the stone steps, and the people were walking around within it.

The building’s innermost room was covered with plum blossoms. Inside, the Archbishop Mei Lisha suddenly opened his eyes and asked in a slightly exhausted manner, “What is that child doing?”

Priest Xin who was beside him began to speak, but stopped. He hesitated for a short time before saying, “He..... is moseying around. He seems to be enjoying the scenery.”

“Enjoying the scenery?”

Mei Lisha gazed at the glow of the burning sunset, and his misty eyes became clearer from the splendid light. He asked with a slightly weird expression, "Perhaps that is the only thing he has done from morning until now?"

"Yes." Priest Xin was a little nervous and replied with a low voice, "He has already moseyed an entire circle around the Mausoleum of Books."

Mei Lisha frowned slightly. The room was incomparably quiet, and the atmosphere immediately became especially constraining.

Just when Priest Xin thought that he would explode into a raging fury, instead he heard the sound of laughter.

The elderly man's laugh was somewhat hoarse, but after listening to it, it was truly a cheerful and happy laugh without any other feelings.

"In the Mausoleum of Books, he does not view the Heavenly Tomes, but the scenery instead?"

Mei Lisha held onto the seat and slowly stood up. Afterwards, he walked to the window with the support of Priest Xin, and he gazed southwards at that green mountain, which seemed to burn in the setting sun. He smiled while shaking his head, but he remained silent for a long time before slowly saying, "I am very curious. What does he really want to do?"

In the Hall of Grand Clarity's side hall, Mo Yu had just finished with handling state documents. She rubbed the space between her eyebrows tiresomely. While looking at the setting sun in front of the hall, she remembered that today was the first day when the Grand Examination examinees entered the Mausoleum of Books to view the monoliths. She looked at the female official by her side and asked, "How is it?"

The female official relayed the process of having those young examinees leave the Imperial Palace to enter the Mausoleum of Books. She described everything in detail and did not forget to include any of the important information.

However, Mo Yu felt that something was missing and asked while frowning slightly, "What did Chen Changsheng do? Did he go and view the first few monoliths?"

The female official had never thought that Lady Mo Yu would actually care so much about a single examinee. After being startled slightly, she quickly went to find the record and passed it over.

Mo Yu flipped open the record and glanced through it. Her expression changed suddenly, and her thin brows were slightly raised. With a cold expression, she said, "This guy, what exactly does he want to do? During such an important moment, he actually still wastes time."

A similar report was sent to the Tianhai Clan at noon.

Of the Orthodoxy's six figureheads, the three archbishops who

stayed in the capital currently sat in the main hall of the Li Palace. After seeing the news from the Mausoleum of Books, they all did not know what to say.

Today, the entire capital had paid attention to Chen Changsheng's actions within the Mausoleum of Books. He was first place in the first banner, and he had undergone his Ethereal Opening at such a young age. Furthermore, the Pope had already used certain methods twice to show benevolence and love to this teenager. Many people wanted to know that if he viewed the monoliths in the Mausoleum of Books and attempted to comprehend the Dao, would he bring shock to the world again?

Chen Changsheng had done it. He had once again shocked the entire capital.

Throughout the whole day, he did not do anything at all. View the monoliths and comprehend the Dao? He did not see a single stone monolith, and have not even properly entered the Mausoleum of Books. He only strolled a lap around the mausoleum. He saw a lot of scenery, and stared blanked many times, just like a true tourist, like the type of tourist that had the most time.